i ain't the worst that you've seen by brawlite

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Summary:

Five years later, Billy Hargrove returns to Hawkins, Indiana.

After getting caught up in some chaos after following his sister to Hawkins Lab in the middle of the night -- where he finds the party and *Steve goddamn Harrington*, all armed to the teeth and ready for some breaking & entering -- Billy becomes determined to figure out the mystery behind the strange events of that night. Too bad no one's telling him anything.

1. 1.1

Well can't you see me standing here,
I've got my back against the record machine
I ain't the worst that you've seen.
Oh can't you see what I mean?

***Jump,* Van Halen**

"Okay," Billy says, taking in the picture of all of them crowded around the outside of the boarded-up, abandoned lab. Six teenagers, with grins too big for their faces and an aura of mischief a mile-wide. It's midnight and the shadows of the night paint the building into something sinister behind them. Something old and decrepit and forgotten. And then there's Steve goddamn Harrington, leaning up against the vine-covered building like it's nothing, like it's not weird that he's there at all.

And Steve? Steve's got a baseball bat balanced against his leg, like he's about ready to vandalize the place.

"Billy?" Max asks, her grin immediately twisting into a frown. "Did you follow me here?"

"Damn right I did. What *is* this?" Billy asks, slamming the door of his Camaro shut and taking one step toward all of them. "Is this some Dungeons and Dragons shit?"

"Uh, yeah," says the curly-haired kid. *Dustin*, Billy thinks. His name is Dustin. "Totally."

"Okay," Billy says, letting his smirk turn into a sneer. It's not like Billy pays attention to their little games, but Billy's been around long enough to pick up on a little. "You each got little roles, right? Warrior, Healer, Wizard, and shit like that, right?" When the kids shrug something like agreement, Billy twists his gaze to Steve. "So, what does that make you, Harrington?"

Steve is annoyingly unflustered by Billy's tone. He shoves off the building and twists the bat around in the air when he moves with an

effortless sort of grace. Then, he rests it on his shoulder. Once the bat's stopped moving, Billy can see that the end of it is punctured-through with nails -- well, that's a surprise. That's some hardcore shit right there.

"Obviously I'm the guy with the bat," Steve says.

"I thought you were a cop," Billy says. He takes another step, advancing on Harrington. The kids stand their ground around the two of them, less flighty than they used to be. "Shouldn't you be here arresting petty vandals, not supporting them? Or are you some kinda crooked cop?"

Steve just laughs. And laughs. And then he laughs some more. He has a bandana tied around his neck, like some kind of hooligan. Even in the darkness, Billy can see that it's blood red. The color of it reminds Billy of the time, years ago, he beat Harrington's face in until it was bruised and bloody and raw. Steve is wearing a denim jacket, not his police uniform. Billy's only seen Harrington in it a couple times -- generally, he tries to avoid anyone he knew from high school like the plague these days.

"Whatever, Hargrove," Steve says. He looks around at the kids -- the teenagers -- and gestures toward the building with his bat. "Are we ready?"

Billy -- well, Billy hates being ignored --so he moves to stand in front of Steve. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Into the lab," Steve says with his eyebrows raised, like Billy's slow.

It's not that Billy doesn't get it. It's just that he doesn't *get it*.

"Call it a tradition," Steve says. Dustin nods along, now standing at Steve's side. He looks like a mini-Harrington, kind of. Same pose, same posture. Same style. "You're welcome to come with, if you want," Steve says.

"No, he's not," Max pipes in.

"Funny story, Maxine. You don't get to tell me what I can and can't do," Billy reminds her.

“Yeah, well I’ll --” Max starts, but then she trails off. Likely, she was going to try lording this over Billy’s head, but she doesn’t have anyone to tattle to, anymore. Not that she ever tattled much -- after a couple years under one roof, she knew better. Doesn’t mean she didn’t threaten, though. Now -- well, now, it’s just the three of them. Max, her mother, and Billy. Neil Hargrove kicked it a year ago. A massive coronary while he was driving -- drove straight into a lamp post going seventy-five. Real messy, real final. Couldn’tve happened to a better guy, Billy thinks.

Billy moved back to Hawkins from Indianapolis when it happened. Sure, he doesn’t have many ties to his stepmother and stepsister, but there’s something there that he couldn’t quite ignore. There’s a kind of solidarity there, when you live under the same roof as evil, some responsibility to each-other. Anyway, Billy was getting bored in Indianapolis, anyway. Maybe he can save up enough cash to go back to the coast, working here in Hawkins. Life is cheap in a dirt boring town like this.

Well, maybe it’s not *always* boring. Not when Billy stumbles upon a group of teenagers and a *cop* ready to vandalize a government lab. It’s no secret that the government was doing shady shit here -- there were all those toxic chemical leaks a while back. It’s also no secret that they’re pretty diligent about coming back to check on the place in their militarized vehicles. If Billy was looking for a building to vandalize -- and he’s not anymore, really -- well, the lab would be dead last on the list.

“You’re not taking these kids into that building,” Billy says, final. He’s still a little weirded out that Steve Harrington spends too much time with a group of teens, anyway. It’s strange. The kind of thing that makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

Steve laughs again and Billy bristles. “Yeah, no,” Steve says. “See, I’m not taking *them* in there. They’re taking *me*.” He grins, all pride and nonchalance and Billy hates it. He wants to punch Steve again, like before. Wants to watch him bleed. “They’d go anyway," Steve says. "So I might as well come with them and watch their backs.”

“Don’t think I’m letting you go in there alone with them,” Billy says, squaring his shoulders and tucking his keys into his pocket.

Max sighs. A couple other of the kids groan. Steve claps his hands together, unflustered. “Great!” Steve says. “The more, the merrier.”

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The inside of the lab is dark and grungy. It was abandoned about five years ago, right when all the shit came out that they were experimenting with chemicals, or something fucked up like that. Honestly, Billy hadn’t paid that much attention to the whole thing. Small town news, and all. It was pretty gnarly, from what he understood -- but ultimately uninteresting. The government is always up to shady shit -- this time it just happened in everyone’s back yard, so people took notice.

The inside of the building is a bit worse-off than Billy would have figured for only five years of abandonment, but then again, maybe their experiments expedited the process, or something. The walls are covered in patches of what looks like black mold and the ceilings are dripping in places with moisture and condensation -- like a cave. About five steps into the building, Billy snagged one of the kid’s flashlights -- luckily, they all seemed to bring spares in those backpacks of theirs. Prepared for anything, or whatever. They’ve all got bandanas (for covering their faces, Billy guesses), flashlights, walkie-talkies, backpacks full of junk, and most of them are carrying a large object suitable for vandalism. Dustin’s the only one with a bat -- like Steve’s, just with no nails. Wheeler’s brother has a crowbar, so does that kid Lucas who Billy used to hate. Max has a tire-iron that looks familiar enough that Billy thinks she might have swiped it out of his car. The two other kids -- a girl and Buyers’ brother -- aren’t armed with anything that could break a window.

Billy wonders if they brought any spray-paint. He’d love to leave the government a little something to remember him by.

“Why’re you hanging out with these losers, still?” Billy asks, when Max falls into step next to him. Billy is bringing up the rear, with Harrington at the front, leading them into the bowels of the building. Billy isn’t sure why they have to go so far *in* -- there’s plenty of unbroken shit out here.

“They’re good people,” Max says. Her knuckles are white around the

tire-iron and her eyes keep darting down each dark hallway they pass.

“What, you concerned about running into whatever crackheads have been camping out in this place?” Billy laughs.

Max doesn’t laugh back. She rarely thinks Billy is funny. “No one is stupid enough to be here for too long,” Max says, seriously.

“Please, whatever chemicals killed all those people years ago are long gone,” Billy says, shining his flashlight into an empty room as they pass it. The chairs are toppled at the workstations and the floor is covered in dark patchy stains. The tabletops are clear, like someone came in and scrubbed everything off -- they probably did.

Max snorts. “Sure,” she says, taking a couple fast steps to catch up to Lucas, leaving Billy all alone at the back of the party once more.

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The building groans as they take the stairs down. It’s a weird sound, especially given that the whole place has been sort of eerily quiet the whole time they’ve been in there. Billy figured animals would have moved in, but nothing seems keen on being inside the building -- even the kids. They’re all a bit on edge, despite the brave front they’re putting on for each other.

There’s more black mold the further they go down. There are patches of it on the ground, black underneath Billy’s boots. Some of it is crunchy, textured, and some of it just looks like old blood, like a massacre happened here. It’s a stupid thought, but it sticks with Billy, off-putting enough that he stops looking down at his feet and keeps his eyes peeled on the walls, on the teens and on Steve, as they wind their way down the stairs.

“Don’t understand why we have to go so fucking far out of the way,” Billy mumbles. They could’ve broken some windows right when they came in and then skedaddled. Maybe the kids are worried about getting caught. They shouldn’t be, not with King Steve the do-good police officer here with them.

Then again, maybe Steve should be worried about his badge. If he gets caught, Chief Hopper might not look too kindly on the circumstances -- him alone in a government building with a bunch of teens and Hargrove himself. The Chief's kinda a hard-ass, and he's never liked Billy, so he wouldn't look too kindly on the company Steve is keeping tonight.

"You're free to head on back," Steve says, as they come to a stop in a long hallway. There's a set of doors that looks pried open, like they were once electronically sealed under security that is now long gone with the power to the building. *Department of Energy with no energy*, Billy thinks. How ironic. There's a small gap between the doors -- person sized. Big enough for all of them to fit through. Only darkness awaits beyond it.

Billy thinks of the stairway splattered with dark patches of something that looked an awful lot like blood, of the long hallways and the shadowed corners he'd have to walk past. The whole place is ominous and weirdly foreboding, and Billy's been in a lot of abandoned buildings in his time. This one leaves a hell of a sour taste in his mouth. He thinks of leaving teens here with Steve, a bad feeling creeping over his skin at the idea. Billy shrugs. "Nah, just don't know why you're going to all the bother, is all."

"It's your funeral," Nancy's brother says. One of other kids elbows him. The girl who Billy doesn't know, with the short mop of wavy hair, just snorts.

"You're about as nice as your sister," Billy says. Nancy Wheeler never much liked Billy, and it's clear that her brother feels the same way. It's fair, though. Billy's given these kids every reason to hate him in the past. He never expected love.

"Hey," the kid snarls, taking a step toward Billy. "Don't you talk about my sister."

Dustin immediately follows with, "Yeah, you don't get to talk about Nancy!"

Steve just grabs the kids by the back of their jackets before they can truly advance on Billy. "Hey. *Hey!* Cool it. You can fight when you're

out of here. You spill any blood now and this gets a hell of a lot more risky."

For whatever reason, the struggling kids go immediately tame at that. They stop twisting in Steve's grip, going limp and docile.

Billy rolls his eyes and laughs. Like it *matters* where a little blood is spilled. He shines a flashlight at the door, and then at Steve's face. Steve winces and shields his eyes. "So, is that where we're headed?" Billy asks, nodding at the gap in the door.

"Watch it, Hargrove," Steve hisses. He adjusts his grip on the bat and then nods. "Yep. Straight through there." For a moment, Billy thinks Steve might ask him to go first, but he doesn't. He takes a breath and then just pokes his head through the gap in the doors and looks around, shining his flashlight where he can. Then, he pulls back with a frown.

Steve leans his bat against his leg and uses his two free hands to pull the bandana up over his nose and his mouth. "It's looking a little gross in there," he says. All the kids follow suit, until it's just Billy left with nothing to cover his face. Steve frowns at him and chews at his lip.

After a second, Harrington sighs, then digs through his pocket to pull out a second bandana. He holds it out to Billy. Billy shines a flashlight on it. It's green and wrinkled like it's been in Steve's pocket for hours. Absolutely not.

"Yeah, no. I'm fine," Billy says. He can handle a little stale air.

"Put the damn bandana on," Steve says.

"Common, Billy," Max says. "Just do it."

"Nah," Billy says. He snatches it out of Harrington's hand though, so they'll all stop complaining. Then, Billy stuffs it into his pocket.

"Alright, man. It's up to you." Steve grins, like there's some sort of joke Billy isn't getting.

Some of the kids pull out headlamps, though some of them just grip

their flashlights a bit tighter as they file through the crack in the door and into the darkness waiting beyond. Billy is the last to squeeze himself through. The building groans again, creaking and moaning around him once he's all alone in the hallway. He finds himself shivering and moving a little faster than he normally would.

The space on the other side of the door is -- exactly the same, just darker. They are in another long hallway that probably looked pretty clean and clinical back in the day. The walls are dirtier than the other ones they've passed, and when Billy shines his flashlight around, it keeps catching on particles of dust in the air -- but they're big and flakey, like ash. He takes a breath and immediately coughs; the air is so acidic and polluted that it hurts his throat. Burning.

Steve is suddenly next to him, tugging the bandana out of Billy's pocket. He ties it around Billy's neck and tugs it up and over Billy's nose. "Told you," Steve says. Billy slaps him away when he's finished. Steve just laughs.

"Let's go, kiddos," Steve says, heading off down the dingy hallway. This time, however, he's not alone at the front of the pack: the girl that Steve doesn't know strides right up next to him. She's tall and slim -- looks like she doesn't have an ounce of muscle on her. She isn't carrying anything except a flashlight, not even a backpack. She looks focused, but nonchalant. Determined. She's traveling light and she's got an attitude and posture that says '*don't fuck with me*' -- Billy approves.

Except --

Except that it doesn't really *make sense*. If they're all in here to vandalize the place, why *isn't* she carrying at least something? If she wasn't planning on participating, that'd be fine (albeit boring), but her posture clearly isn't one of passive compliance. If she didn't want to be here, she'd be dragging in the back with Billy, not picking up the front with Harrington.

There's definitely something strange going on here, Billy thinks. And fuck if Billy isn't going to figure it out before the night is over.

Notes for the Chapter:

i had a *really* shitty twenty four hours and so i sat down and pounded out the first bit of this. so, this is me, throwing it out into the void after some severe sleep deprivation and emotional upheaval.

2. 1.2

“Here’s where we split off,” Steve says, once they walk down another long hallway and come to a fork in the seemingly never-ending tunnels.

“Mike,” the girl whose name Billy doesn’t know, says. Nancy’s brother steps up to her side, holding the crowbar in his hands like a weapon. Billy figures it kinda is -- just against government property, anyway.

“This seems like a shitty idea,” Billy mumbles. It’s not that he’s concerned, but even Billy isn’t dumb enough to think splitting up in a likely-contaminated lab is a good plan. If there *were* any squatters here, they’d probably be decently far into the complex. Far enough that they wouldn’t be bothered by a group of idiotic teenagers just coming into the outskirts to wreck shit. They probably wouldn’t be too keen on someone coming stumbling across them.

“Be careful!” Dustin shouts at them, as Mike and the girl turn toward the right and walk into the darkness down one of the hallways. Their flashlights flicker. Billy watches the light fade as they turn a corner. He watches until it fades completely, until he’s only looking into the darkness of a dingy and decrepit hallway once again.

Steve claps his hands together, pulling Billy out of his thoughts. He turns and watches the kids crowd around Steve, watches the way all their faces change and distort in the constant-moving light from the flashlights and headlamps. It’s eerie, a bit.

“Okay, so. You guys know the drill,” Steve says. “Grab a buddy. Have a look around. Keep your eyes peeled. If you see anything strange -- shout.”

“Hit first, shout later,” Max says, swinging her tire-iron. Billy frowns. She better not break that thing, but she’s got the right idea. There’s frankly not a lot of talk about breaking shit when they’re here for petty vandalism, not just to have a look around.

Steve hums, adjusting his grip on his bat. “Okay, how about hit and

shout at the same time," he suggests. Billy rolls his eyes, but all the teens just nod at him. "We all set?"

Max pairs up with Lucas. Billy doesn't frown or bristle or tutt. The two of them have been friends for five years -- Billy gotten used to the Sinclair kid after this long. Billy probably owes him an apology if he's going to spend any more time around these kids -- something to explain some of the reasons as to why he was such an asshole all those years ago. But he hasn't gotten around to it and it's not like Billy's planning on this becoming a pattern. After tonight, he'll go back to only seeing these people in passing. Besides -- Billy is *still* an asshole. He makes no assertions otherwise.

Harrington puts a hand on Dustin's shoulder and steers him toward Will, the zombie kid. Billy doesn't know much about him, other than he's Jonathan Buyers' kid brother and he was involved in the whole Hawkins Lab cover-up. Maybe that's why they're all here -- some personal vendetta against this place. The two teens team up and duck down a hallway, following Max and Lucas into the darkness. Their flashlights wobble, then fade away.

That leaves Billy and Steve standing in the hallway, alone.

"Common, Hargrove," Steve says without preamble, and begins leading them in another direction. Presumably, a different route than what the others took. Billy can't keep track -- the further down they go, the more the lab is like a goddamn maze.

"This place looks pretty intact for this being a tradition of yours," Billy says, falling into step next to Harrington. Most of the windows that peer into labs are left intact. Other than the mold on the walls and the stains on the floor, it looks like no one has truly vandalized the place. It looks like no one's been here in years.

Steve just hums. Occasionally, he peers into rooms they pass and shines a flashlight inside. Billy isn't sure what he's looking for, but clearly he hasn't found it, yet. The whole place is still quiet, aside from the occasional groan of the abandoned building. There's no shouting, no sounds of things breaking. So, clearly the kids haven't found anything to smash up yet, either.

“So, when do we start breaking shit?” Billy asks. He doesn’t have a bat or a crowbar or anything, but that won’t stop him. He’s a smart guy -- he can improvise.

“We don’t,” Steve says. He ducks into another room, leaving Billy standing in the hallway. A few seconds later he comes back out.

“What do you mean *‘we don’t’*? Isn’t that the whole point?” What the hell?

“Nah,” Steve says. “You just assumed that’s what we were doing.”

Billy drags behind for a bit, feeling equal parts annoyed and let down. He also feels lied to. Even though his assumption was wrong, Harrington let him go along with it. The red-hot spark of anger ignites in him, starting to burn away in the pit right under his rib cage. Billy grits his teeth, jaw clenched, fist balled up at his side.

“Then why the fuck are you here? What’s with all the bats and crowbars and shit?”

Billy senses Steve roll his eyes more than he actually sees it. “They’re for protection,” Steve says.

“That’s what guns are for, idiot.”

Harrington laughs. Billy wants to punch him. It’s a impulse he reigns in, but he does shove at Steve with an angry hand, knocking the guy off balance. Steve doesn’t seem too deterred. Maybe he spends too much time hanging out with hormonal teenagers, but he doesn’t bristle like he used to. He’s harder to rile up, which is frustrating. Years ago, Billy had so much fun doing just that.

“Yeah, see -- guns don’t do much.” Steve pauses for a moment, thinking. “Remember the news five years ago about all of the experimental chemicals leaking from here?”

“Obviously,” Billy bites out.

“Come on, Hargrove. It’s a lab. Do you think they weren’t testing those chemicals on animals?”

Billy narrows his eyes, shining his flashlight at Harrington's face. He watches Steve's pupils contract as Steve glares at him. "So you're saying there's some fucked up mutant animals wandering around this building?" Billy asks.

"Basically, yeah. There could be."

"What the fuck, Harrington! You didn't think to tell me this *before*?"

"Slipped my mind," Steve says. He starts walking again. This time, Billy follows more promptly. "If it helps, we've never run into any."

That...kind of does help, but only a bit. Steve and the kids all have weapons, though, so clearly they're not totally unconcerned, even if they've never seen anything.

They walk in silence for a while. Harrington starts peaking into just about every doorway they pass. The further into the bowels of the building they go, the darker it becomes, the more murky the air gets. The walls become more saturated with whatever moldy slime is growing on them, and Billy notices the floor start to crunch under his feet. The tiles are coming up, pried up by roots of some kind, but Billy can't tell exactly where they're coming from. They're so far underground -- maybe the roots snuck through the foundation of the building and are looking for moisture.

When he goes to touch one of the walls, Harrington reaches out and grabs Billy by the wrist before he can make contact. "Just how stupid can you be?" Steve hisses. "Don't touch anything."

"This is no fun," Billy says. When the heat of Steve's hand against his skin gets too much to bear, he shakes Harrington off. He should've done that earlier, should've fought Steve off before he could even make contact, but there's something thrilling about Harrington reaching out to grab him. Like the good old days in high school where Billy picked fist-fights with King Steve for fun. "*You're* no fun," Billy says, shoving against Steve's shoulder.

"I never promised you fun."

Before Billy can complain some more and try to rile Steve up further,

Harrington ducks into another room. Billy takes a couple steps further past the room, but immediately pauses. There. Underneath the crunching of his boots against the crumbling floor -- he thought he heard something. But, when he pauses, there's nothing.

Billy takes another step -- and it's there again. It's kind of a high-pitched, musical gurgle. The sound is strange and foreign -- like nothing he's ever heard before. It immediately puts him on edge, all of his instincts screaming at him to be on alert.

"Harrington," Billy says.

When he doesn't hear anything back, just silence, Billy tries again: "*Steve."*

He gets nothing. Immediately, Billy whips around and ducks into the room Steve slipped into earlier. "Steve," Billy says, eyes catching on Steve in the darkness.

Harrington is crouched over at the far end of the room, shining his light into a grody looking corner and poking the wall with his bat at the same time. When Billy gets closer, he can see the wall kind of...*recoiling* at each press of the nails. There's something about the movement of it that kind of makes Billy want to gag reflexively, but he holds himself together.

"What the fuck?" Billy asks.

"No idea," Steve says. He pokes it again, but harder, until the nails drive into the wall like its flesh. The wall gurgles -- and, oh: that's the sound Billy heard earlier.

Billy's stomach clenches.

"What *is* that?" It looks like the rest of the weird mold growing on the walls, but more three-dimensional, more alive. It's kind of like a tangle of roots. But it also kind of looks like intestines, too. Guts, stuck to the wall -- alive and squirming. Billy doesn't like the way it looks like it could crawl off the wall at any given moment, sprout legs, and walk away -- there's that much *structure* to it.

Steve hums. "God knows. Doesn't look *good* though." Steve stands up,

though he keeps the flashlight aimed at the wall. Billy watches the way Steve plays with his lips between his teeth, worrying at it as he thinks. “But, I guess it could be worse.”

Billy looks from Steve and to the wall, and then back again. “Don’t know, Harrington. That looks pretty messed up to me.”

“We’ve seen worse.”

Billy doesn’t ask what’s worse than a writhing, squelching, gurgling wall. His stomach is still twisting a bit at the thought of it, so he leaves it be and trails after Harrington as they continue moving into room after room. This time, Billy ducks into each room with Steve, simultaneously curious and revolted by the idea that they could find more strange stuff. Nothing seems quite as bad as the thing Steve was poking at, though. Just little patches like it, but nothing quite so big.

There’s nothing slithering around on the ground, nothing crawling around in the ceilings. Just gross walls and gross floors and gross air.

Billy doesn’t think it’d hurt to have a nail-ridden bat like Steve’s, though. Just in case.

None of this is really what Billy expected to find.

They come to another room. This one is larger -- it looks like it was once a kitchen or a break room, back in the day. The fridges hang open at the back of the room, weirdly ominous with more black mold cascading from inside them. The room smells different than the previous ones -- more dead, more decaying.

When Billy follows Steve to the back, to peer at the fridges, he lets out a surprised huff. “Gnarly,” Billy says. The mold looks *dead*. Like it’s been burned over or just purely dried up. It’s thick, like it was once as lively and three-dimensional as the slime in the other room Steve had been poking at -- but it’s just kind of a husk, now.

When Steve pokes at the mass of it with his bat, it disintegrates like ash and crumbles to the floor. Billy holds his breath as he watches it fall toward his toes. Steve moves one of his feet and crushes some of the larger pieces beneath his boot.

“Sweet,” Steve says. “This was like the other one, last time we were here.”

Huh. “What happened to it? Why did it die?” He gets the feeling it didn’t just *happen*, but that Steve and the kids have something to do with its change of state.

Steve shrugs. “Don’t worry about it. The only important thing is that it’s dead.”

Billy frowns. “So, that shit in the other room -- it’s bad that it’s alive? Or...whatever it is?” Billy isn’t quite sure that *alive* is the right word. It feels right, but it doesn’t sit happily on his tongue. He doesn’t really like to think of mold on walls as alive.

Steve raises his eyebrows. “Did it look *good*?”

“Not really.”

“Then, there’s your answer. We want it all dead. Like this guy right here.” Steve taps the fridge with his bat. More black ash crumbles out of it.

Something feels *wrong*. Like Billy isn’t getting the whole picture, here. It irks him, rubbing him the wrong way, infuriatingly against the grain.

Steve moves to turn away from the fridge, presumably to continue exploring, but Billy reaches out and grabs at his arm. He fists his fingers around Steve’s upper arm and pulls him back, not letting go. “Hey! How did it die, Harrington?” Billy asks, a bit more forcefully this time.

“I said don’t worry about it, Hargrove.”

That’s not a good enough answer for Billy. His rage snarls through his chest again, heart thudding between his ribs like a caged animal. “*Tell me*,” Billy snaps. Something’s not right, here. So many things aren’t right. He doesn’t like not knowing, especially when things are so goddamn weird. This feels important, viscerally so, and he’s not going to be walking around here in the metaphorical dark while he already literally needs a flashlight. His fingers tighten around

Harrington's arm until Steve hisses and tries to pull away. Billy doesn't let him go anywhere.

Steve moves first. He spins on his heel and throws his shoulder against Billy's chest. The baseball bat is luckily in his other hand, which likely might have been a conscious choice on Steve's part, but Billy isn't thinking much about that. He's thinking about the way Harrington's shoulder felt against his chest, how the sudden pressure turned to a thudding pain. He's thinking about the way he stumbles back against the wall, taking Harrington with him because he refuses to simply let go. Steve isn't going to win that quickly, that's for sure.

Billy grabs a fistfull of the collar of Steve's jacket and gets real up close and personal, snarling into Harrington's face. "You wanna dance, pretty boy? It's been a while, huh?"

The thrill of the fight isn't something Billy's felt in a long time, but what can he say -- King Steve just brings that instinct out in him. There's something about his perfect face, about his nonchalant attitude, that ruffles Billy's feathers. And he *really* hates the way Steve always sounds like he knows something Billy doesn't.

Maybe Billy's got a short fuse: so, sue him.

Steve shoves, Billy grabs, Steve shoves back. Billy uses the wall, gross and moldy as it is, for leverage, to push himself off of and to shove Harrington back. He doesn't like being pressed against the wall by Harrington -- it makes him feel caged and uneasy, even more trapped in this disgusting place. It's a dumb move though, because the floor is dirty and jagged and Steve stumbles back, unable to get his footing, and so Billy stumbles with him.

A few things happen at once: Steve drops the bat -- or rather throws it to the side, Steve falls, and Billy falls with him because Billy refuses to let go. He's got a death grip and he's going down with it.

"What the hell, Hargrove?" Steve wheezes, wind knocked straight out of him from the impact with the ground.

"Tell me," Billy says. "Stop keeping dumbass secrets." It can't be as simple as Steve and the kids just torching the shit, or he would've

spilled the beans already.

“You’re not going to believe me,” Steve says. His voice is still winded. He’s still mostly unflustered, though, which is just plain annoying. Harrington should be seeing red, like Billy. He should be just as riled up and as ready to fight in this weird as fuck environment. Instead, he’s just kinda letting Billy throw his weight around.

Billy raises his eyebrows. He makes no move to get up and off Harrington, because he’s in the position of power, here. With his forearm resting dangerously close to Steve’s throat, Billy’s got the upper hand. He lets himself ‘slip’ a bit, until he’s only an inch from cutting off Harrington’s air.

It’s dark now, the room pretty shittily lit as both their flashlights fell to the floor amidst the skuffle. Billy has to squint to make Steve out in the darkness. They both have got their bandanas over their mouths and they’re panting through them, not able to get quite enough air for the amount of effort they just exerted.

It’s been a long time since Billy spent any time this up close and personal with Steve Harrington, but he can’t say that this encounter really reminds him much of their high school days now that he’s here. Billy’s anger back then had been charged with tainted self-loathing, with deep-seated rage, frustration, and isolation. Now, well -- now, a lot of things have changed. Neil Hargrove departure from this world is only one of them. Needless to say, Billy’s still working through his issues, but he’s come a hell of a long way. Pinning Steve to the ground like this is still exhilarating, just in in different ways. Sure, Billy is still riled up and angry because Steve is keeping secrets, but he feels less like bashing Steve’s face in and more like just picking a fight for fun and a little bit of intellectual profit.

“Go on, pretty boy. Spill.”

“You keep calling me that, Hargrove, and a boy like me’s gonna get ideas.” There’s a smirk in Steve’s voice under that blood red bandana, something sounding close to good natured. There’s something strange about the fact that Billy can’t ruffle Steve’s feathers, even when he’s trying to. But that’s fine -- he can make do with the situation as it is.

Billy huffs out a laugh. “Get whatever ideas you want, Harrington -- just fill me the fuck in.”

Steve sighs. “Fine. Let me up. Then, I’ll tell you.”

Sure, it can’t be all that cozy against the ground, but there’s no way in hell Billy is going to give this one up easy. “Nah. I’m pretty comfortable right here.”

“God, you’re still such an asshole, Hargrove.”

“You got that right.” From behind his bandana, Billy grins. Steve rolls his eyes.

“It’s Mike and El,” Steve finally says. “What they’re doing -- that’s what’s killing all this shit.”

Billy furrows his eyebrows. “Mike and *who*?”

“El,” Steve says. “The girl who was with Mike?”

“Oh,” Billy says. “I’ve never seen her before.”

“Chief’s daughter. She was homeschooled, she’s doesn’t get out much. Anyway, can you let me up now? Or are we going to spend the rest of the night getting cozy here?”

“I donno,” Billy says. “This seems like a pretty damn decent way to spend the night.” He winks. He’s just trying to rile Steve up and Steve is having none of it. The guy doesn’t even care that he’s got Billy plastered on top of him, pinning him to the very disgusting floor of a contaminated government lab. God knows what kind of shit he’s exposing himself to right now. Billy shifts until his knees are solid against the ground, until he can feel the crunch of dead mold underneath them. There, now he’s a bit more steady. And he’s not *quite* as plastered to Harrington.

When Steve just stares at him, giving him *absolutely nothing* to work with, Billy keeps talking. He’s never had a problem running his mouth. “So, are you gonna tell me what Mike and *El* are up to? Just what they’re doing to kill this shit?”

“Wasn’t planning on it, no,” Steve says.

“Yeah, well. Keep talking, pretty boy. I’m not done listening.”

“If you like the sound of my voice that much, Hargrove…” Steve starts. He lifts his head off the ground, getting himself even more in Billy’s face. Billy can hear the grin in Steve’s words, the playful teasing behind his tone. It’s kind of nice, the push-back. It’s been awhile since someone didn’t bend to Billy’s threatening whims. Not that he truly expected Steve to, because Steve’s always been a fighter -- but Billy still appreciates it.

Billy doesn’t get a chance to respond. He hears the crunch of feet against the ground and hears a cough that sounds a hell of a lot like Max.

“Uh,” she says from a couple steps in the doorway.

Billy looks up and away from Harrington to a flashlight being shined in his eyes. “Get that thing out of my face, Maxine.”

Max points the flashlight next to them. “I hope I’m not interrupting something,” Max says with a smirk, sounding very much like she *is* hoping to be interrupting something. She sounds like Billy -- he can’t even be mad. Well...he can be. But he can also be a little proud.

“Maybe you are, kid,” Billy says through his teeth.

Max just crosses her arms, uncaring. “Steve,” she says, going for ignoring Billy completely apparently. “Will and Dustin found something weird.”

“Define weird,” Steve says from underneath Billy.

“Uh, you’re probably just gonna want to look at it yourself.”

“Well, Hargrove?” Steve says. “What are you waiting for? Let me up and maybe you’ll get some more of those answers you’re looking for.” Steve puts a hand on Billy’s shoulder and pushes a bit. He hadn’t even thought to do that before, Billy realizes. Steve just laid there and let Billy tower over him -- he didn’t even try to fight back.

“Fine,” Billy says. He pushes himself up and offers Steve a hand. Steve stares at the outstretched hand for a moment, like he’s unsure if Billy’s going to drop him or not. Then, Steve finally takes it, putting a gun-calloused hand in Billy’s own. Billy helps him to his feet -- even though he thinks about letting go, first.

Steve picks the bat and they both pick up their flashlights. Billy takes one last gander at the fridge full of decaying, crumbling mold, thinking about the alive and writhing mass in the other room. His stomach turns again. Whatever the kids found can’t be as gross as that, can it?

“Lead the way, Maxine,” Billy says, dusting himself off, ready to continue on deeper into the lab.

Notes for the Chapter:

> well, this week continued to be incredibly shitty, but what can you do? write more, i figured. ¯_(ツ)_/¯

3. 1.3

Lucas is waiting for the three of them when Max emerges from the kitchen with Billy and Steve in tow. “Took you long enough,” he says, the perfect image of a teenager with too much angst and the desire to sound cool and nonchalant. He’s leaning up against one of the disgusting walls like it doesn’t bother him, like the slime isn’t soaking into his jacket. Hi crowbar is balanced against his shoulder, knuckles clenched tight around the weapon. It’s a pose and Billy knows it -- mostly because he use to do the same damn thing. Billy knows these nerds don’t care much about popularity, but high school is always about being king in *someone’s* eyes.

“Yeah, well. These two losers were taking some quality time,” Max says with a roll of her eyes. There’s a hint of a tease Billy doesn’t like in her voice, something that puts him on edge and alert. Max and he don’t have a terrible relationship these days, but they aren’t particularly on friendly-teasing terms, either. Even if she doesn’t mean anything by it, the implication behind her words is enough to make him grit his teeth, hackles rising.

“Watch it,” Billy snaps. He walks past her and checks her with his shoulder, hard enough that she huffs and stumbles back. A discouragement.

“Asshole,” Max says, under her breath. Billy doesn’t care what she says, as long as she stops talking about him and Steve.

Now that Billy thinks about it, he doesn’t so much like the idea of Max walking in on him pinning Steve to the ground, as much as he was fine joking about it moments ago. It wasn’t what it looked like, *obviously*, but that’s not really the point at all. It makes his skin feel too tight, too warm, too unfamiliar.

“Okay *kids*,” Steve says. He loops an arm over Billy’s shoulders, like they weren’t *just* shoving at each other in the other room, hissing and growling like two tomcats. Billy feels his shoulders tense, even though he tries not to. Steve is taller than him -- not by much, but the way he so easily drapes an arm over Billy is enough to grate. “Let’s roll.”

Billy hates feeling small -- he hasn't felt small in years. He shrugs his way out from under Steve's warm arm -- jeez, this place is *cold* -- and gestures at the dark hallway with his flashlight. Impatient, now. "Lead the way, Maxine."

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They don't have to go far, but it sure as hell feels like it. They wind their way down more maze-like hallways and then down a set of what looks like service-stairs tucked behind a rusted door. The stairs are rickety and metal, rusting and old. He doesn't touch the railing for fear of tearing up his hands. Billy isn't a fan of the way the metal creaks under their combined weight, and he can't help but breathe a sigh of relief once they're all on solid ground again.

From the stairwell, they move into a room that looks a lot like a small warehouse. There's an elevator to the side, though the power has been off to the building for ages. Without the stairs, the place would be totally cut off.

"It looks like they used this place for storage," Lucas says, toeing against a dissolving cardboard box with his boot. Everything down here has been consumed by the mold -- it's soggy and disintegrating around them. The air is even worse, ashen and thick -- Billy can't help but be grateful for the bandana around his nose and mouth.

"This isn't the same place where Mike and El are, right?" Steve asks, looking around.

"Nah," Max says. "But I think it's nearby. They're maybe few floors down?"

"Cool," Steve says, though the whole thing sounds very un-cool.

A sudden noise stops Steve before he can say any more. It's low and gurgling, like the noise that Billy heard in the hallway -- just louder, deeper. It echoes in the room around them and Billy feels the hairs on the back of his neck raise. It's an instinctual fear that washes over him, unfamiliar and paralyzing. Billy is used to tangible fears, *human* fears. Not some mysterious noise in an even more mysterious abandoned lab.

Billy watches as Steve's grip tightens around that bat of his.

"Here," Lucas says, walking toward the corner of the room, leading them toward a towering stack of boxes. Whatever's making that noise is coming from behind the boxes, clearly. It's muffled, but low -- growling and gurgling and like nothing Billy's ever heard before.

Steve reaches out and grabs Lucas, pulling the kid behind him. "Stay behind me," he says, like they're going to find some kind of monster behind the boxes. *Yeah, right,* Billy thinks. If there was anything in here, they would've noticed earlier. Anything down here would have to be hungry as hell and ready to go for the first moving thing. That's gotta rule out weird mutated animals, right?

Billy tries to convince himself of that fact as Steve move slowly forward, toward those boxes. Steve's got the baseball bat raised and ready to strike. Billy sandwiches the kids between himself and Steve, bringing up the rear even though he hasn't got a weapon. Whatever -- he has his fists if needs be. Which he *won't* need, he tells himself, because the thought of any other scenario else is absolutely absurd.

But it doesn't hurt to be mentally prepared.

Billy watches Steve as he rounds the corner and gets a good look at whatever's behind the boxes. He watches as Steve's shoulders drop, but only slightly. He's still holding the bat high, but it's less defensive now. Crisis averted, Billy shoves his way past the kids, pulling Max and Lucas behind him, to peer over Steve's shoulder. Harrington is practically frozen, staring at the wall -- Billy can see why, now.

It's pretty much exactly what they saw in the other room, the writhing, pulsating mass of something alive and throbbing against the wall -- just bigger. Much bigger. The whole thing is at least the size of a car, just taller, and the center of it isn't black like the other patch Billy saw -- it's glowing a bright and fiery orange. Spread out from the center are a mass of overlapping vines or tentacles or whatever. Like one *really messed up* poison ivy plant crossed with some weird-ass slime-mold. It's moving a bit like it's breathing, a gentle in-and-out pulse. The movement is incredibly off-putting, Billy thinks.

After a while of just staring at the thing, Steve sighs and says,

“Gross.” Billy can’t help but agree.

“See?” Max says, trying to shove past Billy. He doesn’t let her. He keeps Lucas and Max behind him, despite their protests, both verbal and physical. Whatever -- it’s not like they’re actually trying to throw *real* punches at Billy’s back, just little mosquito bite-type jabs.

There’s something about this whole situation that Billy just doesn’t like. He doesn’t have to know as much about this place as these nerds, nor does he have to be some kinda scientist, to know that this is *bad*. Basic gut instinct tells him that this whole thing is fucked up. Whatever chemicals got out of this place clearly affected the air, the mold, the everything.

“That’s not *dangerous*, right?” Billy asks, nodding at the shit on the wall.

“Let’s see.” Steve takes one step forward and pokes at the thing with his bat. Billy is expecting it to gurgle and move like the other one did.

Instead, it screams.

Immediately, Steve springs back, bat raised against any defense the *thing* could throw at him -- but it never comes. It just screams and writhes against the wall and then -- finally -- stops.

That’s it. “Give me that,” Billy says, turning and making a grab for the tire iron Max is holding. His heart thuds heavy and loud in his ears.

“Get your own!” Damn, her grip is pretty good. Probably made better by that scream they all just heard.

“That *is* my own!” Billy says. Sure, he could wrench it out of her grip, but eventually he lets her win. The fear in her voice was unmistakable. Whatever, he’ll find something better.

“So,” Lucas says to Steve. “What is it?” Good, perfect. Billy was thinking about asking the same thing.

“Hell if I know.” Steve pokes it again. It doesn’t scream this time, but

it does groan. All of the weird vines -- or tentacles or whatever the hell they are -- tighten and constrict. Like a plant. Or some kinda sea creature. Billy remembers playing with urchins and coral when he was younger in California, poking at them until they all contracted as a defense mechanism. Maybe that's what this is.

"Do we think its…" Lucas trails off.

Steve looks back at him, glancing between Lucas, Max, and Billy. Keeping an eye on all of them -- it's probably the cop in him. "Do we think its *what*?"

"I donno," Lucas says, like he doesn't *want* to say it. Billy gets the distinct impression he doesn't want to voice the thought, like giving it words will give it truth. He kinda knows the feeling.

But: "Spit it out, Sinclair," Billy says. "We haven't got all night." Unless they do, in which case…

"A gate," Lucas says, words quick and hurried in Steve's direction. He ignores Billy pretty much, which is understandable. "Like the one downstairs?"

Steve raises his eyebrows.

"A what?" Billy asks. What the fuck does that even mean?

"A gate, dumbass," Max says. She reaches out to poke the thing with the tire iron, but Billy pulls her back before she gets the chance. Hell no. He doesn't like the way the thing moves or sounds or any of it. He's not about tempting fate here when their only means of escape is a rickety ladder that is five seconds from falling apart and good luck on their side.

"Oh yeah, that's so much clearer, *thanks*," Billy says. Steve snorts at his words words. "A gate to *where*?" Billy asks. There's a hell of a lot of puzzle pieces here and Billy feels like he's only getting one out of every thirty or so. Maybe even more.

Steve bristles. So do the kids. "It doesn't matter," Harrington finally says. "We need to get El and Mike down here when they're done downstairs. Let's go."

It's clear Steve is itching to get out of this place, which is fine by Billy. He can get his answers when he's not staring down a horror story in a secluded room with only one exit.

Steve ushers the kids away from the thing on the wall. Billy brings up the rear, though he finds it hard to tear his eyes away from the monstrosity. It's just so *weird*. It's the strangest damn thing he's ever seen in his life. It's one of those sort of morbid can't-look-away type feelings, though Billy knows he must.

"Billy! Hurry it up!" Steve shouts, already a good distance away. Billy rolls his eyes and looks away from the wall.

"I'm coming, *jesus*. Hold your horses, Harrington," Billy says.

He turns away from the wall and takes one step forward, then another. And that's when, *of course*, Billy hears something behind him. It's the sick squelch of those slimy vines moving, sounding very much like something trying to push and claw its way through them. Billy whips around on his feet, prepared to fight some rabid mutated creature with his bare-damn-damn hand, heart pounding in his throat.

"*Harrington*! Get your ass over here!" Billy shouts, eyes watching whatever-the-hell-it-is squeeze through those vines. The vines wriggle and move, though it's hard to distinguish much of anything between them, yet.

It's just as he hears feet running up behind him that Billy gets a good picture of what's sliding through those vines. It's small -- real small -- maybe just the size of an overgrown sewer rat. With a sickening plop, it falls out of the mess of the wall and lands in a heap on the ground. It doesn't move -- stunned, maybe. Billy inches forward, eyes straining in the darkness as he shines a light on the thing. It's not like any goddamn sewer rat Billy's ever seen before -- it looks slimy, like a frog -- but also not like a frog at all. When it turns and hisses at the light, after presumably gathering up its senses, Billy can see that it doesn't have any eyes, but has plenty of teeth. A mouth full of 'em, in fact.

"*Get it!*" Lucas shouts from somewhere behind Billy when it hisses.

Billy doesn't need to be told twice -- whatever it is, even though it's small, it doesn't look friendly. Billy's ready to kick it, but Steve's even readier.

Steve -- King Steve, everybody -- swoops in, sliding past Billy, and makes a swing at the creature. It's fast: he hits it dead-on with the bat and spears it with those nails.

Before Billy can even process it, the wall is screaming again, louder and longer than before. It's like a fire alarm, a goddamn siren, blaring loudly in Billy's head. The noise is white-hot and piercing and *terrible*. The mass of vines writhes against the wall as Steve takes his bat and pounds the creature into the ground again and again -- presumably as a just-in-case measure. Better not take any chances with mutated frogs, right?

The wall continues to scream as Steve toes off the now pulverized mash with his boot. The kids are shouting and hollering and all Billy can do is watch in disgusted fascination as Steve cleans the viscera off the bat.

"Go get El!" Steve shouts at Lucas and Max over the din of the screaming. He's got his eyes glued to the wall.

"And leave you here? No way!" Max shouts back. Lucas looks like he's thinking the same damn thing.

God, it's so *loud*. Billy feels like his head is going to split open.

"Someone has to watch it in case anything else comes out!"

Max looks like she's going to argue, but Lucas just grits his teeth in understanding and pulls at her sleeve. Steve shouts '*Go!*' at them again, and they finally nod and go running off toward the rickety stairs. Billy keeps his flashlight trained on them until they're out of the room.

Then, he looks back at Steve. At the wall. At Steve, looking at the wall.

Well, evidently, Billy's staying here with Harrington. In the dark. With the writhing, screaming wall that something just crawled out of.

Billy shines his flashlight on Steve, illuminating the hero in the darkness. “So, is that it?” Billy says. For all that his heart is pounding, the creature was much smaller than he thought it’d be when he imagined mutant creatures prowling the lab. Sure, it looked absolutely fucked up, but it wasn’t truly a thing of nightmares. Maybe a really bad daydream, but not a nightmare. The more Billy tries to think of it, to try and rationalize himself out of the pounding in his chest from the excitement of the whole ordeal, he actually gets a bit calmer. It was *small*. It was *easily killed*. And there was just *one*.

Even the mass on the wall is quieting down. Less screaming at this point, more upset-gurgling.

Steve huffs out a laugh. “Hopefully,” he says with his teeth clenched together.

He doesn’t look very appeased, though. No, there’s still something Billy’s missing, here. One little mutated frog-creature with too many teeth isn’t enough to get Steve all up in arms like this. The guy is, from what Billy’s seen, pretty cool as a cucumber. Sure, the kids might be easily riled up -- but not Steve.

And Steve doesn’t look comforted by how easily that thing went down at all.

“So, what?” Billy asks. He makes himself move from where his feet were glued to the floor, beginning to wander around. He shines his light on the boxes, on the walls, searching for anything he can use as a weapon. “*That’s* the mutant shit you’re worried about? Seems pretty dinky to me.” He kicks shit open and paws through boxes as he talks.

Steve laughs when Billy picks up a piece of pallet wood and tests the heft of it. “If it’s so *dinky*,” Steve asks, “then why are you looking for a weapon?”

Billy rolls his shoulders, lazy and nonchalant. “Because everyone else has one. I wouldn’t want to feel left out.” Because he doesn’t like the look in Steve’s eyes that says he’s ready for *more*. Because he doesn’t like the look of Steve scared. There’s something wrong about it that makes Billy’s stomach clench unpleasantly, but he refuses to look at that feeling for too long. It’s easiest to write off as sheer-

preparedness: if Steve -- King Steve the cop, the hero -- is scared, then Billy should be concerned about his own safety.

“Yeah, alright, Hargrove.” Steve’s voice doesn’t follow Billy around, which means that he’s still staring at that thing on the wall, unwilling to take his eyes off it. That, too, isn’t good.

Billy wanders back toward Steve when he can’t find anything better close by than the piece of splintering wood.

“So,” Billy says. “How much bigger do they get? Like -- a cat? A dog?”

Steve finally looks at him. He looks down at Billy’s feet, then lets his eyes drag up Billy’s body. For one short moment, Billy feels a little bit like a piece of meat with Harrington’s eyes on him like that. It’s enough for him to ready a snappy sarcastic retort on his tongue, but Steve’s eyes keep going, up and up, until he’s looking about a head over Billy’s eyes. “Taller than you,” Steve says, with a tone that makes Billy shiver. Steve is still looking above him with this vacant look in his eyes, like he’s imagining the shape of something he’s seen before in his nightmares many times over. He’s dead serious, even though Billy wishes he was joking.

Maybe he is.

Then again, maybe he’s *not.*

Billy swings the pallet wood in the air, testing its rather-shitty weight. It whiffs through the air like balsa-wood and Billy knows it’d break the second it even tapped something solid. Aw, hell. So, he drops it.

“Yeah, fuck that,” he says, kicking at the piece of shit wood so that it clatters and skids against the the moldy ground. “Back in a sec, pretty boy,” Billy tosses at Steve, before stalking off to the other side of the room, deciding to take his search for a weapon a bit more seriously, just in case Harrington isn’t pulling his leg.

4. 1.4

“So, how long have you been doing this?” Billy asks from behind his bandana. He’s camped out next to Steve and the writhing mass on the wall. They’re both sitting on plastic storage tubs Billy had found during his search of the room -- he’d dragged them over so that they could at least get comfy while keeping watch on the wall.

There hadn’t been much in terms of weapon-making-materials in the room, but Billy’s made do. Currently, he’s wrapping some dirty rags around one end of a rusted-out pipe he wrenched straight off of one of the walls. It’s over three-feet long and sturdy, and it has a decent heft and a good weight. The only problem is that the metal is rusty and jagged -- he needs the rags knotted around one end of it so he doesn’t end up tearing up his hand. Steve had been pretty adamant about that part.

“I didn’t know you cared, pretty boy,” Billy had said.

“Like hell I do, Steve had said. *“But if you start bleeding, it’s both of our funerals*.” Billy hadn’t known what Steve was talking about, but Steve was adamant and Billy didn’t feel like that was a good enough fight to pick. Besides, Billy was of more use to everyone and better with a weapon if his hands weren’t torn to shit. And hey -- maybe he didn’t *want* to tear up his hands just for the sake of it.

Steve just shrugs at Billy’s question. His eyes are still focused on the wall, though nothing has come out of it for a while now. Right after the first creature had died at Steve’s hand, another one had squeezed through. Steve had pulverized that one, too -- but after that, there had been nothing. “A while,” Steve says. “Since high school.”

Billy raises his eyebrows. “That’s a long time to be dragging kids into an abandoned building in the middle of the woods, Harrington.”

“Shove it, Hargrove. You know we’re not doing anything weird.”

Billy looks at the wall incredulously. It pulses under his stare. “Yeah, nothing weird about this at all.” The whole thing is pretty damn laughable. He never thought he’d hang out with Harrington again

after high school -- but this? This is absolutely insane. Billy nearly laughs, but catches himself.

Steve *does* laugh. “Alright, you got me there.”

Billy ties off the end of the rag, stands up, and tests the rusty pipe as a weapon. The grip is good -- the rag is knotted and textured enough to give Billy a good hold on it without slipping or cutting up his hands. The pipe is about as thick as a baseball bat at its widest, just not quite as designed for swinging. The rust itself actually might be what makes the whole thing valuable: the pipe hasn’t started to lose core structural integrity, but it’s got a bite to the surface that could leave a nasty mark if Billy manages to swing hard enough. Sure, he hasn’t played baseball in years, but he remembers the general basics. He’s sure he’ll remember more if anything actually comes at them.

He’s almost *ready* for something a little larger than an overgrown city rat.

But nothing comes.

Aw shucks, looks like Steve got him all worked up for nothing.

“I’m beginning to think that was all the excitement we’re gonna get,” Billy says, disappointed.

“Can you please not tempt fate?” Steve asks him, tearing his eyes away from the wall to toss a glare in Billy’s direction.

“Aw, is King Steve superstitious?”

Steve continues to glower. In the dim light of their flashlights, Steve looks much older than he did in high school. He’s grown into his face and filled out a bit more -- he’s not as stick-skinny as he used to be and his angles aren’t quite as razor sharp. Time has been quite kind to him, Billy thinks. He’s not so sure it’s been quite as kind to himself, but that’s fine. You can’t have it all.

Steve grits his teeth. “Look, I just want to get out of here, alright? I hate this place.”

That throws Billy a bit. It’s the first time Steve has really shown any

hint of emotion all night, other than just plain annoyance at Billy, which is expected but also boring. So far, Steve has been pretty hard to fluster or to egg on. For hours Steve has been a pillar of courage and determination, unbothered by any of the weird alien shit that they've seen so far. He's much more stable than the Steve Billy knew in high school -- but that tone was close enough that it sounded almost familiar. It's curious and intriguing, and it's like a scab that Billy finds he just can't leave alone.

"Yeah?" Billy asks. "Then why do you keep coming here?"

"Someone has to go with the kids."

"Who says they're your responsibility?" Billy asks. "If you've been doing this every year since they were, what, twelve? Do they really need a chaperone still?"

Steve scowls at him. "They're like -- I don't know, man -- they're like my brothers and sisters." Then, Harrington laughs. It's a harsh sound, not full of his earlier mirth at their weird situation. Instantly, Billy doesn't like it -- it sounds more like something that would come out of his own mouth than Steve's. "I don't expect you to understand," Steve says. "I mean, you took off, what, *the day* after graduation?" There's an accusation heavy in his tone, dark and pointed.

The words are unexpected, despite the fact that Billy's been trying to get under Steve's skin for hours. For whatever reason, he didn't expect Steve to go straight for something so personal. Or maybe it's that Billy didn't think the words would end up hitting a place Billy didn't even realize was quite so raw and unguarded. He feels the weight of them edge under his skin, a sharp accusation from a guy who doesn't even *know* him. Steve just knows Max, so any point of view he has on Billy's story is automatically skewed against Billy's favor.

It hurts more than he realized it would. And Billy doesn't like that at all.

The familiar flames of anger immediately ignite inside him, impulsive and hot.

"*Hey*," Billy snaps, like he's scolding a dog. He points the rusted pipe at Steve. Good thing they both have weapons. "You don't know shit about me, Harrington."

"Don't I?" Steve says, pushing himself up from his plastic crate so that he's standing, too. It scrapes against the uneven black ground with the movement, an unholy clatter in the quiet of the room. Steve's eyes blaze with pent up rage from years past and that bat hangs in his hand like a violent promise -- it's a damn good look on him, Billy thinks.

"You don't," Billy bites out. Even if Steve is something of an image, Billy's still pissed that this perfect prom king kid thinks he knows him. Billy stalks forward, letting the pipe fall to the ground. This is something he'd rather settle with his fists.

Steve laughs. Harsh and cruel. Again, it sounds like something that would come out of Billy's mouth before it would Steve's. "Yeah, I doubt you've changed much since high school," he says. "But what I can't figure out is why you'd come back *here*. Did you not feel big enough in the city? Did you need to come back to little old Hawkins to feel more important?" Billy can't see Steve's lips, but he knows he's smirking -- it's clear in the fire in his eyes.

Billy grabs a fist-full of Steve's jacket and hauls him close. It enrages Billy so badly that Steve thinks he *knows* him. "You better shut the fuck up, Harrington, or you're gonna regret it." Billy's rage is a rattlesnake, coiled and ready to strike at the first opportunity. His skin vibrates just like the rattler's warning, iminent and dangerous and so wonderfully familiar.

Steve shoves back at him, clearly on edge enough that he's actually willing to not let himself be pushed around; he's willing to fight back. Perfect -- so all Steve needed was a little bit of a push.

"Yeah, Hargrove?" Steve says. "A washed-up punk like you clearly doesn't have anything better to do than pick fights to make yourself feel better. I don't see how that's much of a change from high school, except now you're old enough that you should know better." Steve grins underneath his bandana and his eyes are cold and cruel and disappointed. "But who am I kidding -- why would I have expected

any different from trash like you?"

Billy's fist swings before he even really register it. It's been awhile since he's thrown a punch, but it lands firm and solid against Steve's jaw, glancing against flesh and cloth.

Billy hears the clatter of Steve dropping his bat. Then, he registers the bright-hot heat of pain blooming on his own face, on his left cheek right below his eye: Steve punched him. Billy never even saw it coming.

For a long moment, they just stare at each other in the darkness, squared off and panting. Their flashlights are on the ground pointing up at the ceiling, casting strange shadows on Steve's face. He looks untouchable and fierce like this and Billy kind of loves it. A familiar heat coils in his stomach, stretched and molten. The thrill of the fight, the allure of this violent dance.

A delighted laugh barks out of Billy's chest and he throws himself forward, going for Steve and his perfectly angled face. It's not like high school, though. Steve knows his defence now -- he plants his feet and dodges and blocks and throws punches of his own.

They go and they go and they go.

It's fun as *hell*.

Billy isn't really expecting any of it, so when he gets clocked in the head hard enough to make the room spin and he stumbles back, dizzy and unawares, he is *thrilled*.

When the room stops spinning and Billy's eyes focus properly in the darkness, Steve is standing a few paces in front of him, stance low and defensive. He's breathing hard just like Billy and his hair is flying in all directions. There's already a deep bloom of a bruise forming on his cheek and it makes his eyes look darker, more dangerous. It looks like Billy got Steve's eyebrow bad, too; from the looks of it, it's moments away from bleeding. Billy wishes he had a camera, so he could remember this moment forever, so he could look back and remember Steve this way, just like this, perfect and frozen in time.

When Billy normally thinks back on Steve Harrington, he sees his face beaten and bloody, the way he was that night in the Buyers' house. Back then, he didn't have the fire in his eyes that he does now, the primal confidence and the sheer determination that shines through even in the darkness of this shitty place. Billy would much rather remember *this* than the way Steve crumpled beneath his fists that day years ago. *This* is equal, this is *fun*.

"Is that it?" Steve asks, voice lower and rougher than before. "Is that all the great Billy Hargrove can give me?"

"Oh, I could go all night, pretty boy," Billy grins.

Billy rushes forward with another punch, this time aimed lower, for Steve's chest. They scuffle for a little while, trying to get purchase against each other, until a sudden sound shocks them free of their focus.

They freeze.

The sound is not hugely loud, but it's the groan of metal on metal, punctuating still silence. The lab is so quiet though that it might as well be decibels loud, screaming into the darkness. Steve's got his arm wrapped around Billy's neck and Billy's stooped over, head trapped against Steve's chest. They're both warm and dripping with sweat in the cold of the room. The metal of Steve's jacket zip drags and scratches against Billy's cheek.

There's another metallic groan, louder than the last -- it's coming from behind them, by the stairs -- and then, Billy hears a shout. It's echoed and muffled, but he's pretty damn sure it's one of the kids calling Steve's name.

Billy and Steve untangle themselves quickly and clumsily. Billy spares a look at Steve's face and feels pride hit him like a warm wave. He really did a number on Steve -- and from the way Billy's face feels, Steve did a number on him, too. Steve looks like he might need stitches on his eyebrow from where one of Billy's rings got him, and when Billy runs his tongue over his teeth, he can taste blood, rich and metallic in his mouth. It tastes good.

Steve grabs the bat, looks at Billy once more, and then sighs. “Stay here,” Steve says, and jogs off in the direction of the noise and the shout, to the room that houses the small and rickety staircase.

Enlivened, Billy pants for a moment in the darkness, feeling awake and overjoyed. It’s been a long time since his veins sang like this, screaming at him in the most pleasant way, like he’s energized, like the sun has hit him face first on a cold winter day. He missed this feeling, the way his face and body pleasantly ache, the way that Steve had fought him, had twisted underneath Billy’s hands and his grip. He missed seeing that fire in Steve’s eyes.

There’s always been something about Steve Harrington, something alluring and captivating and altogether *too much*. Something that Billy just couldn’t ignore. He’s never let himself look too closely at that curiosity, knowing that if he focused too hard on it, it would become clear in a way he wouldn’t like, a dangerous and complicated way. But, abstract and out of focus, he can allow himself to enjoy it. To bask in that fascination, to let himself fall prey to those heated looks Steve can be so capable of.

So easily, he could let himself drown in Steve Harrington’s intensity, his fire.

Billy picks up his rusty pipe, adjusting his grip over the knotted rags. He tosses it in the air and swings at nothing, feeling pumped, feeling overjoyed. The metal zips through the air and Billy barks out a laugh and swings again and again. He wonders what it would feel like to go at Steve with the pole, but quickly decides against it; no, Billy wouldn’t give up the feeling of his knuckles, his flesh against Harrington for anything.

Maybe, instead, it would be better with Steve at his side.

Billy hears shouting: Steve, from the bottom of the stairs, and the kids from above. It echoes in a way that makes the words indistinguishable. Eerie and unnerving.

He hears more groaning of metal, more encouraging shouts.

Then, he hears a louder groan -- the sound of something snapping --

then, a scream. And then, a deafening crash. Long and drawn out. Billy can't help but turn and look in the direction of the stairs, but he can't see anything in the darkness. Just a partially illuminated doorway from Steve's flashlight on the other side. The light flickers as Billy tries to focus on it.

Shit, Billy thinks. That couldn't have been the stairs, could it? Fear sparks in his gut, hot and sharp. *What if it was?*

Thoughts hit him like a barrage of unwelcome punches. Are they stuck down here? If that was the stairs, was anyone on them when they fell? What if it was *Max*? Did Steve make it out of the way in time? What if Billy is trapped down here all alone -- surely the kids wouldn't leave him to die -- right? And then there's more -- thoughts and concerns he can't even articulate with words, just sharp spikes of panic and uncertainty.

His heartbeat is deafening in the silence that follows the crash.

Billy spares one glance at the mass on the wall. It's quiet now, no longer writhing or screaming, just pulsating gently. He's supposed to be watching it, but nothing has come out of it for a while. So, Billy grabs his flashlight, tightens his grip on the pole, and goes running in the direction of the stairs, heart pounding heavily in his chest.

He stumbles through the doorway and stops short. Steve is standing only a few feet in front of him, frozen with his flashlight pointed at a pile of rubble. It doesn't take any time at all to realize that the rubble is the trashed remains of the staircase because it's totally gone, collapsed under its own rotting weight. There are multiple beams of flashlights shining down from above them, almost tangible in the heavy air, like some messed up light-show -- and there's shouting, too -- Billy almost couldn't hear it over his own hammering heartbeat.

"Was -- anyone on those when they fell?" Billy hears himself ask, too loud, as he steps up next to Steve. The air is even shittier than before -- full of ash and debris and dust from the fallen stairs. He wants the answer and he doesn't, refusing to look too closely at the remnants of their only means of escape.

"-- Everyone's fine," Steve says. He takes a breath, presumably trying

to steady himself. “Mike was on them. But, he -- El caught him -- when it all fell.”

“We’re all OK,” someone shouts from above. It’s a boy’s voice, but it’s distorted and Billy can’t recognize it. He doesn’t think he’d be able to anyway, though. “Are you two OK?”

“We’re fine!” Steve shouts back, head tipped up toward the hole in the ceiling a few floors up. Billy focuses on Steve’s neck, pale in the darkness. He watches Steve swallow, watches as reality comes crashing down on him -- it’s visible and terrible, watching Steve’s understanding dawn.

Billy’s panic feels like it’s stuck at the back of his throat, unformed, not quite yet realized.

“We’ll get you guys out!” Someone shouts -- that’s Max. Billy knows her voice. She sounds worried, which is strange. Max has never once been worried about Billy in her life. Then again, she’s probably more worried about Steve than Billy, now that he thinks about it. He’s done nothing to warrant worry, nothing to broker real friendship between them. Billy tilts his head up to look above them, into the shining beams from the flashlights. He can’t really see anyone beyond them, but he knows there are kids up there beyond the lights. He lets himself find a stray shred of comfort in that.

“No,” Steve shouts. “You need to get El to come down here to close the gate, first!”

“Um,” shouts another one of the boys. Billy thinks it may be the curly haired kid with the lisp. He gets a real bad feeling from that tone, before the next words even come: “No can do, bud! She’s out cold!”

Steve doesn’t say anything. When Billy looks at him, he’s frozen, staring up at the ceiling like it holds answers. Billy knows that it doesn’t.

“How long until she wakes up?” Steve says. Billy thinks he’s maybe not even loud enough for the kids to hear.

But they do. “At least a couple hours,” someone shouts. “You better

get comfy."

"Go find some rope," Billy yells up at them when Steve says nothing. When he doesn't hear them scuffle or move, he shouts a firm: "*Now!*" Only then does he hear the telltale scramble of many feet skidding against moldy floors. There's shouting and grumbling and words that are too far away to hear -- and then, they're gone, leaving Steve and Billy to still silence once again.

They stand there for a long time, staring at the crumbled remains of their escape route. It's just a pile of useless junk now, rotten and rusted and painful to look at.

They're trapped now, but that's a feeling that Billy's pretty damn used to. He's been trapped many places before -- this is by far the strangest, but it's decidedly not the worst. And so far, it hasn't been *that* bad. It's definitely been the most exciting Tuesday night Billy's had in at least a year.

"Well -- fuck," Billy says, deciding to break the silence. "Guess it's just you and me, pretty boy."

When Billy looks back at Steve, Steve is already staring at him. Huh. He's shining his flashlight at Billy's face, so Billy squints and points his at Harrington's. Steve doesn't say a word, but something in the atmosphere changes. The thick air gets heavier, harder to breathe. Steve's eyes are big and dark and he looks decidedly worried as he stares at the bruise Billy knows is blooming right under his left eye.

Steve takes one step forward, then another, until he is crowding into Billy's space. The shadows on Steve's face warp and twist over his features and Billy's eyes track the changes. Billy's feet are glued to the ground, his muscles tense. He's half ready for another fight -- but it never comes.

Instead, Steve reaches out and clumsily pulls down Billy's bandana, shining his flashlight to inspect the damage.

Feeling suddenly sharp, Billy gives him a grin he typically only saves for trying to score free drinks. Something between proud and coy. Billy knows it's a good look on him from previous attempts.

“Inspecting your handiwork, Harrington?” Billy drags his tongue over his lips while Steve watches, letting it slide over his teeth slowly, tasting blood and sweat and gratification.

Steve’s eyes are stuck on Billy’s mouth. He says nothing. Billy’s heartbeat echoes loudly in his ears, too heavy, too fast. Time feels like it slows, stretching between the two of them in this dark space.

Billy waits.

“You’re bleeding,” Steve finally says.

Billy barks out a laugh. “You did good, Harrington. You should be proud. No one’s been able to land a punch like that in a while.”

“Fuck,” Steve says. “You’re fucking *bleeding*.” Prideful is about the last thing Steve sounds -- instead, he sounds distracted. And angry. And maybe even a little panicked.

“I hate to break it to you, pretty boy…” Billy reaches out, closing the distance between the two of them with his hand. Maybe a little too gently, he drags his thumb over the cut on Steve’s eyebrow, the one Billy made with his ring. Steve hisses, but doesn’t pull back. When he’s done, Billy puts his hand in front of Steve’s face, shining the flashlight at the blood that came away on his thumb. “But you’re bleeding too,” Billy says, feeling a little proud and a little adrenaline high. Steve is so close, so dumbstruck, so tangible.

Steve makes a noise in his throat. Low and upset. Even with the bandana covering his face, Billy can tell he’s frowning.

“What’s the matter, Harrington? Scared of a little blood?”

Slowly, Steve takes a breath. His eyes find Billy’s in the dark. “Yeah,” he says. His voice is serious and rough. “And you should be too.”

Notes for the Chapter:

and now the story *really* starts. ;D

5. 1.5

Billy thinks it's all *bullshit*.

Steve is jumpy -- and it's bullshit.

They're stranded and stuck -- and it's bullshit.

Billy's face hurts -- and that's bullshit, too.

He follows Steve back to the room with the fucked up wall because he doesn't have anything better to do, no better place to be. Billy can either be standing, staring at a pile of useless rubble, or he can be standing and staring at an overgrown mold on the wall that keeps spawning mutated toads. Or frogs. Or whatever they are.

Either option is definitely bullshit, but at least by the wall he can see something coming at him -- even if it's a *nightmare horror* the size of a large egg.

Honestly, he doesn't even understand why Steve is so spooked.

Billy swings his metal pipe against a soggy cardboard box in frustration, delighting in the satisfying *thwump* that results when it makes contact. The sound startles Steve, standing by the wall with his bat slung over his shoulder like some professional slugger.

"Hey!" Harrington barks out, turning in Billy's direction with a grimace that makes it all the way to the harsh cut of his shoulders. He points that damned bat at Billy like an sharp threat. "Can you not?"

Billy grins, feeling the spark again between the two of them. A smoldering fire catching alight again with the help of a gentle breath. It edges out the boredom and the frustration that are starting to itch right underneath Billy's skin. His fingers twitch with the need to make a fist, to throw a punch through the air and pick right back up where they left off. "What, you still wanna go, Harrington?"

"No," Steve growls. His teeth are bared like a dog and Billy loves it. It's a good look on him, feral and wild. "We've done enough

fighting."

Billy isn't sure if he means in the past, or tonight. Regardless, Billy's not sure if he agrees.

"You chicken, Harrington?"

"Oh my *god*, can you just stop? Are you even capable of not," Steve gestures wildly, waving his free hand at Billy, "being like that about everything?"

Billy just shrugs, a gentle roll to loosen his shoulders as he lets the end of his pole whack against the ground, relaxed in his grip. It makes a satisfying metallic *thud* in the empty silence between them. "Where's the fun in that?"

Steve says something. Billy's not sure exactly what, because one second he's watching the way Harrington's lips purse with frustration -- and the next, Billy's eyes are catch on something slithering past Steve's foot.

Billy doesn't even think, he just jolts forward and shoves Steve out of the way with a hard check to the shoulder, punting whatever the hell it is ito the air with a forceful kick. It's gross and slimy, squishing against his foot, screaming as it lifts off the ground. Billy's metal pipe is totally ignored in favor of just flat out running at the thing when it lands with a sickening squelch and kicking it again.

And again, and again, until it is clearly and definitely dead.

Blood is rushing in Billy's ears, loud and pounding, when Steve says, "Well, that's one way to do it."

They don't get much time to talk, though. Billy doesn't even get much time to admire his kill, other than to note that it's one of those frog things from earlier. Just like the ones Steve killed.

Their little lull from earlier shatters as both of their eyes dart to the wall, where small, slimy creatures are beginning to crawl out of the mold. The moment Billy kicked that creature, the mass on the wall started screaming and writhing again, but he had barely even noticed, so focused on the task at hand.

Now -- well, the sound is unignorable and nearly deafening, full of the sharp spike of rage and pain and enmity.

“What the *hell*?” Steve shouts, beginning to wail on one of the creatures with his bat. Billy can barely hear him over the sound of the screaming, over the hissing of the creatures, over the sound Billy’s pipe makes when it collides with slimy flesh.

Some of the creatures have legs. Some of them don’t. Some of them look like overgrown tadpoles, some look more like giant frogs. Some are a little larger than that, too. All of them make a weird hissing-screeching sound, a blood-curdling and waterlogged scream as they go for Billy and Steve with brutal accuracy.

Billy can’t see any teeth on them, but he doesn’t let them get close enough to find out if they are capable of biting. Anything making that sound in his direction isn’t playing nice.

It helps, being able to hear them coming in the dark. Their two flashlights aren’t nearly enough to light up the whole room.

It’s kind of a horror-movie scenario, really.

He kills five, ten, fifteen of the mutated amphibians before he looks over at Steve, who is panting heavily in the dim light of the room, bat poised in the air and ready to strike again at the next thing that comes at him. He looks like a movie hero, a figure cut straight from a magazine. The bat is dripping slimy black blood and Steve’s glistening sweat at his temples, looking warm, and thrilled, and impossibly devastating.

It’s a good look, Billy thinks, breathing hard in the thick air through his bandana. It’s hard to catch his breath, but he tries anyway, taking advantage of the short lull they seem to be experiencing, considering nothing’s screaming or coming at him.

After a beat, when the adrenaline fully hits his system with no immediate outlet, Billy lets out an excited shout, kicking up one of the still-twitching carcasses into the air and whacking it with his pipe like it’s a bat of his very own. *Home-fucking-run!*

"*Whoo*! You think there'll be more?" Billy shouts. He knows the answer. If the wall's still screaming, the answer's definitely yes.

Steve doesn't even have time to answer when the second wave hits.

There are more of the larger creatures this time, clawing their way out of the wall with chilling squeals.

Honesty, Billy doesn't have much time to consider just how fucking weird this is. Right now, he's focused more on the creatures going for his ankles.

Turns out, they do have teeth. Something latches onto his calf, razor sharp teeth cutting straight through his jeans like the fabric is nothing. It hooks onto Billy's skin like a leech and he is momentarily distracted, momentarily *freaked the hell out* trying to get it off with a near-panicked hand. He does, though. Eventually. Billy *really* kills that one. He makes sure it's *extra* dead, before wailing even harder on anything else that comes at him.

The pain makes it all the more real. Before, it had felt a little bit too much like a dream, a strange story of following his sister and her friends -- and Steve fucking Harrington -- into an abandoned government lab. Now, with the heat of blood dripping down his leg from tiny impossible fangs, there's no doubt that Billy's awake. That this is some weird nightmare horror he's walked himself straight into.

He'll worry about the how's and why's later: right now, *getting through this* is at the top of his list of priorities.

But the how's and why's are *definitely* pressing. Don't get him wrong.

"What the *hell*," Billy shouts, when one of the creatures -- longer legs this time, altogether bigger -- jumps up and tries to take a chunk out of his arm. *Absolutely not*, Billy thinks, flinging his arm -- and subsequently, the creature, who was latched right on -- to the side. He whacks it with the rusty pole, ignoring the ribbons of blood running down his arm. He whacks it again, wall screeching in his ears as the creature dies.

"Are you okay?" Steve's shout comes from the side, more frantic than

before, but still centered. Billy can't see him, but he can hear the heavy sound of a bat with nails colliding with something soft and fleshy. *Good swing*, Billy thinks, impressed, imagining something dying at Steve's hands.

Billy pants, his eyes searching the dim light of the room for more movement. It's gone quiet. He spins in a circle -- fast, then slow -- and makes sure there's nothing hiding out there for him in the shadows.

"Yeah," he finally says, though he keeps the pole in the air, ready. "You?" He keeps his back to Steve. It seems safer, instinctual. Steve isn't a threat, Steve's *fun* -- Billy's got his back, just like how he knows Steve has his.

"I'm good," Steve says. Billy would agree -- Steve *is* good. He's good with the bat, good under pressure, good in a little fist-fight, too.

Maybe Steve Harrington is a little cooler than Billy ever gave him credit for.

He doesn't get much time to consider that new reality, though. Because just as Billy is waiting for another wave, he hears a sound, a solid *crunch,* in the corner. Like a footstep. But it's definitely made by something bigger than the little things they were fighting. He immediately whips to face the noise, but it's too dark. His eyes can't focus, no matter how hard he searches.

He shines his flashlight, but doesn't see anything. The shadows are too dark, his light is too dim.

"Harrington," Billy says, his voice barely a whisper. "*Steve*. Did you hear that?"

"*Yes*," Steve hisses through his teeth. Billy takes that as the request for silence that it was. He stays quiet and still and peers into the dark corner that the noise came from, squinting to try and see -- anything. The room is cold, his skin prickling with goosebumps. His blood is warm and distracting as it drips down his arm and his leg, the flow of it easing as it clots. The steady pulse of pain is grounding, something to focus on instead of the instinctual fear that's trying to claw its way out of his gut.

Billy doesn't even see it coming.

One moment, he's standing, peering into shadows. The next, he's flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling, ears ringing.

He's stunned, he realizes, trying to snap to. To focus. The pain in his head -- from it colliding hard with the ground -- comes only seconds later, throbbing and sharp and insistent.

When his eyes focus, he realizes there's a dog standing on his chest, snarling down at him. Its paws are on his shoulders, holding him down with too much strength, too much dexterity. His vision swims and he blinks, eyes trying to focus on the blurry shape above him. It's so hard to see, poorly illuminated and obscured by Billy's head injury. The thing is -- dark. It's -- slick and shiny, like the other creatures. It -- Billy blinks hard, but his vision doesn't change -- it doesn't have a *face*.

It doesn't have a face. It doesn't have a face.

Billy's heart climbs painfully into his throat with hooked barbes, panic rising and bubbling and threatening to spill over.

It's so much worse than that, though.

Because, after a beat of Billy panicking, it *opens its face* directly over Billy's head and screams. The sound is blood-curdling, but that's not the worst part. The worst part is that, when it opens it's face, Billy's entire field of vision encompassed entirely by *teeth.* Rows and rows and rows of teeth.

So many teeth.

Panicked and dizzy, room spinning around him, Billy just barely catches Steve in his peripheral, twisting the bat around next to him in the darkness with a brutal spin. It happens fast: the nails catch the light, a violent warning, and then Steve swings. The creature howls, knocked off Billy's chest by the force of the blow. It recoils, then comes at Steve in a mess of teeth and screeching. The hiss of the bat flies through the air again only a split second later, colliding with soft, slick skin.

Steve and the dog -- the creature -- tumble into the darkness together in a hurricane of sound and movement and violence.

Billy tries to scramble to his feet to help, arms reaching out for his pole, but his vision swims with the sudden movement and --

Everything goes dark.

--

When Billy comes to, the room is brighter.

His head is *killing him*, but he forces his eyes open and blinks away the last remnants of the shadows from his vision. Christ, everything *hurts*. As he pieces together his surroundings, eyes taking in the clean wall across from him, it becomes very apparent that he's been moved.

"*Hey, he's awake*," someone whispers loudly from his left.

Steve suddenly appears in his field of vision, crouching down into a squat in front of Billy. "Hey. How're you feeling?" Steve's cheek is bruised and he's got a nasty cut over his eyebrow -- *from Billy's ring*, his brain supplies him, in a swelling rush of pride -- but otherwise he looks fine. A little dirty, a little tired -- but fine. He looks very much like the cop he is, peering down at Billy like he's a kid who got into a fist-fight. It's a look Billy's pretty familiar with.

"Like I got hit by a train," Billy says, words stumbling out over a cotton tongue. He reaches up to touch his head, where it hurts, but Steve catches his wrist before he has a chance.

"Hey. Don't touch." Steve's fingers are warm and careful against Billy's wrist. He remembers being cold, so cold -- it was like a freezer where they were. But it's not so cold anymore.

Billy takes a second to *really* look around, groggily letting his eyes slide off of Steve.

The walls are clean, the floors are normal. They're clearly in a different part of the building, now. Closer to the outside. Besides looking pretty abandoned, the interior hallways of the lab look -- fine. Dirty, obviously, but in an expected sort of way. The kids are

standing off in a cluster a few yards away, whispering amongst themselves. They look fine, too.

Billy blinks, long and hard. The darkness swirls behind his eyelids, his teeth clenched against the pain in his head. He tries to remember. There's pain and more pain, and a hell of a lot more darkness. He remembers slugging Steve across the face. Remembers getting trapped. He -- remembers, foggily, hitting things, small frog creatures, with a pipe. He remembers -- something coming at him? A dog -- but, no, not a dog at all. And then -- he doesn't remember anything after that.

"Let's get you out of here," Steve says, offering a hand down to help Billy up, fingers extended and inviting. Billy doesn't take it.

"There was a...dog?" Billy asks, instead.

Steve just nods. "Yeah, man. No idea how it got down there. It was all rabid and shit."

Billy remembers its face. Or, rather, it's lack of face. Even in the darkness, it had been apparent. Even in his hazy, swimming memories, Billy can see it, clear as day. He can also see all those teeth, especially when he closes his eyes. Glinting and sharp in his memories. That was no rabid dog. "It was all -- mutated and shit," Billy says. "It didn't have a *face*, Harrington."

Steve looks something close to worried. He's biting his lip and chewing on his cheek. "It was just a dog." He raises his eyebrows, tone of voice going weird and then concerned. "You hit your head really hard, Billy. Are you sure you're feeling alright?"

With fumbling hands, Billy pulls a cigarette out of his pocket, lights it, and takes a long drag. He's super *not* feeling alright, but he knows a faceless dog when he sees one. He also knows a lie when he hears one. "Don't bullshit me, pretty boy," he says.

"I'm not bullshitting you." Steve spits, matching Billy's tone. "It was just a dog. You tripped, hit your head, and knocked yourself out cold. You were probably hallucinating at that point. I don't know what to tell you."

Billy narrows his eyes. “How’d we get out?”

“Huh?”

“Of the basement. How’d we get out?”

Dustin appears over Steve’s shoulder, stepping into Billy’s vision like he was invited into this conversation. “A complex system of ropes and pulleys,” he says. “You’re really heavy, do you know that?”

“You’re telling me that you strapped me up and *pulled* me out of there while I was unconscious?” It seems like -- a lot of work. Also, a lot of time. He doesn’t feel like he’s been out *that long*.

“Yep,” Dustin says proudly. He glances over at his friends and grins. They smile back, but they pointedly don’t look at Billy. He tries to catch Max’s eyes, but she won’t look at him, either. Typical. “We’re really good at stuff like that,” the kid says.

Billy looks back at Steve. “What happened to the dog?”

“The dog --? I knocked it out? It was just a dog, Billy. It wasn’t very difficult.”

Billy remembers the way it screeched in his ears, the way it shoved him to the ground with so much vicious force. He remembers the way it pinned him with the strength of a human, weird clawed feet pressing down on his shoulders like hands. He remembers the way it howled when Steve had slugged it with that bat of his.

That was not *just a dog*.

And goddamn, Billy hates being lied to.

“You said there were mutated creatures and shit, Harrington. We saw them. Don’t play dumb with me.”

“Yeah, I mean there are those weird frogs things,” Steve says. “Those are totally mutated. They’ve got these strange fish teeth.” Steve nods at Billy’s arm, where he remembers one of them trying to take a chunk out of his skin. It’s bandaged in white gauze. Evidently, one of the kids had come prepared with a first-aid kit. “One of ‘em got you.

But that's really the worst of it. It's not like there are *monsters* running around," Steve says, unperturbed.

"The frogs things -- we call them *pollywogs*," Dustin says, matter-of-factly.

"He doesn't need to know that, Henderson," Steve says.

"What about the -- gate?" Billy asks. "Isn't that what you called it? The wall, with the weird shit on it. The one the frogs came out of."

"It's just mold," Steve says. He's fidgeting, like he can't wait to get out of here. Billy can't blame him -- he wants out of this place, too. It's clawing at him, the overwhelming need to leave. An instinct he can't ignore, primal and fierce. "That's where the pollywogs live. In it. Don't worry about it. We took care of it," Steve says.

Billy grits his teeth and stubs out the reminder of his cigarette on the floor next to him. Fine. If this is the way Steve wants to play this game, it's the way Billy will play it. If Steve wants to play dumb and lie straight to Billy's face, that's *fine*. It's not like Billy can't figure out what's really going on with a little hard work and dedication. It's not like he's doing all that much with his time these days, other than working at the garage.

So, Billy lets himself nod and puts on a smile with some teeth. A real charmer, just for Steve's pretty face. "Alright," he says. "Sounds good, Harrington. Let's get out of here, huh?"

This time, when Steve offers Billy a hand to help him to his feet, Billy takes it.

6. 1.6

Notes for the Chapter:

please heed the new tag: gaslighting

Max drives Billy home in his Camaro.

He doesn't like the idea of handing over his keys to a teenager, but he doesn't get much choice about it after Steve fishes them out of Billy's pocket and pushes him into the passenger seat. Billy doesn't have the fight left in him to resist.

The car ride is silent and strange. Each passing second is tinged with the acidic bite of being lied to, the regret of not being *stronger* or *better* or even just a little bit faster. Billy remembers it all in little flashes, foggy with the thick, ashen air and the haze of slamming his head against the ground. It's disjointed and murky -- but the memories are there, dark and smoky, perched on the edges of his consciousness. Lurking. Waiting.

Billy's had enough concussions in his life to know that this is one. It's a familiar, dizzy feeling -- head feeling foggy and too full. This time, everything is saturated strangely, all greyed out and waterlogged.

"What time is it?" Billy finally asks, watching trees pass in the darkness. Blurred, dark shapes against the inky blackness of the night. He swallows down the dryness in his throat -- everything still tastes like death, like dying. Steve's bandana, which is still hanging around his neck, didn't do much to filter out the shitty air in the basement of the lab. Or maybe it did, and he'd be coughing up a lung right now. Trees pass, giving way to an open stretch of road, bracketed by fields, fields, and more fields. "This isn't the way home," Billy says. "Where are we going?"

"It's three AM," Max says. Billy doesn't even remember what time he found the kids trying to break into the lab, but it hadn't been that late. It's clear that they were in that basement for a *long* ass time. "And we're going to the diner. You hit your head -- you shouldn't sleep."

“Are you a nurse now, all of a sudden?” Billy asks, feeling out of sorts and pushed around. There’s no real bite to his words, though -- not like there used to be with Max. No open resentment, no animosity.

Max rolls her eyes -- or Billy assumes she does, because she doesn’t reply, just keeps driving in silence with both hands on the wheel.

--

“Black coffee,” Billy says. He even adds a “*please*.” He manages to pull his eyes up from the checkered table and flash the waitress a trademark grin, but he knows that it falls way short of charming. He’s too tired, too groggy. She smiles back at him anyway.

“Same for me,” Max says. “And two pieces of the pie of the day.”

“Sure thing, sweetie,” the waitress says, taking their menus with the pleasant hum of someone who does this on the daily. She moves on to the next table while Billy contemplates the prospect of eating anything. He’s not hungry, at all, but he probably needs something for the coffee to sit on.

After a beat, Max slides two painkillers over to him. Billy wonders how long they’ve been sitting in her pocket, likely taken from one of the kids’ first aid kits. They seem like the prepared types. The pills certainly aren’t from Billy’s car; Billy’s never been prepared. Not once in his life.

“What kind is it?” Billy asks after swallowing them dry, eager for the ache in his head to abate. The diner is too bright, too piercingly loud for his eyes. He can barely focus on anything that’s not the table, as garish as it is.

“Huh?”

“The pie. What kind?”

“It’s cherry,” Max says. They fall into silence again.

A couple minutes later, their coffees arrive in front of them in stained white mugs, steaming and hot and perfect. Billy sips carefully at his while Max smartly leaves hers alone until it cools down a bit.

The pie is good when it gets to them. Warm, and a little tart on Billy's tongue.

"So," Billy says, around a mouth-full of bitter cherry and sweet, buttery crust. "Are you going to tell me what happened back there? Or are you *also* going to pretend I'm too dumb to figure out when I'm being lied to."

"Keep your voice down," is all Max says.

Billy just raises his eyebrows and waits for her to keep talking. Instead, she eats her pie in silence.

Eventually, Max puts her fork down on a clean plate. The *tink* of metal on ceramic is too loud in Billy's throbbing, cotton-filled head. "Nothing happened," she says.

"Yeah?" Billy asks, taking a long sip of his coffee. These days, there's little hostility between the two of them, no more bad blood festering like a wound. Things aren't *great* by any means, but they're better. Better since Billy moved back to California. Even better still, since he's been back in Hawkins. "So…"

"So, yeah," Max says, after clicking her teeth together in a tight smile. "I'm going to pretend you're too dumb to figure out you're being lied to."

And Billy -- well, Billy is too tired to argue with that right now. It's also not a lie, which he appreciates. So, he yields, just like he did earlier. "Alright," he says, after another sip of rich, dark coffee. "If that's how you want to play it, Max, that's how we'll play it."

"Please just leave it alone, Billy."

"Fat chance," he says. "I always wanted to be one of the Hardy Boys when I was a kid."

--

The next day's headache is worse than any hangover Billy's ever had. He thinks it's a combination of the whack on the head, the shitty air he breathed in, and the couple of hits Harrington got in on him. His

face doesn't look great either, but it certainly could look worse. It *has* looked worse.

So, that's something. At least his vanity can survive even if he has to ignore his pride completely.

The pie and coffee fuel him through mid-morning. Then, he calls out of his shift at Hank's Garage and passeses out for a good few hours. He wakes up feeling groggy and thick-headed, but alive.

The afternoon sun shines through the thin curtains of the motel's curtains, bathing his room in a pleasant, blue-tinted light. The place he's staying, the Twilite Motel on the outskirts of town, hasn't been renovated or redecorated since the early seventies -- and it shows, especially in the decor. But it's cheap and it's meant for long-term guests, with a little kitchenette and a fridge, so Billy makes do with it. Sure, he could stay with Susan and Max, but he doesn't want to. He both doesn't want to intrude and wants his own space -- and he doesn't particularly feel like sleeping under that roof again, even though Neil Hargrove is dead and in the ground.

He'd only planned on sticking around for a couple days, at the outset of it all.

Yet here he is, two months later, with a job and a place, however crappy both of those are.

And now, maybe, he has even more reason to stick around. Even if it's just to figure out why a bunch of kids -- and *Steve Harrington* -- are lying to him about some weird chemical leak in an old government lab and some freakish mutated creatures that spawned from it. It's kind of dumb, when it comes down to it -- he already knows part of the story, so he doesn't get why they all got so *weird* about it. So goddamn strange.

He downs some instant coffee, as well as a couple more painkillers, and gets in his car and drives.

Fields, trees, buildings all pass by in a blur as reviews the situation in his head for what he knows and what he can extrapolate:

Billy knows that, about six years ago, there was a leak in the Department of Energy building. A girl at Hawkins High died. So did a few other people. Just before Billy left Hawkins, some nutjob broke the story and the government closed everything down and moved their operation elsewhere, leaving the building vacant and a path of hurt and devastation in their wake.

Billy knows, *because he's seen them with his own two eyes*, that there are weird mutated creatures that spawned from whatever leak happened. Whatever it was wasn't just deadly -- it created biting frog-things the size of sewer rats and, despite what Steve and the kids told him, a dog with no face but many, *many* teeth. And maybe more things, too.

Billy knows that that Steve and the kids go back to the lab every year. Steve mentioned it, but Billy gets the feeling that if he brought it up again, he'd just be lied to. Told it wasn't true. But that doesn't change the fact that Billy found them all there, at the abandoned lab, armed to the teeth and ready. They clearly know the layout of the place, decaying and decrepit as it is. Probably, they've been showing up before it looked quite so bad.

Billy knows that he was attacked. Knows that he hit his head. Knows that he watched Steve fall into the darkness with a creature with no face, armed with a wicked bat with nails. He knows that they were stuck down in that nothingness room and yet, somehow, Steve and he made it out pretty unscathed. And then -- they just left. No fuss about the creatures, no fuss about the *weird wall* they all seemed to care about. No nothing.

Nothing adds up.

Billy knows there's something he's not being told, and by god, he's going to get to the bottom of it if it's the last thing he does.

--

He shows up at the police station a little after three.

Billy knows it's a quieter time at the station from all of his teenage jaunts into the building. He figures not much has changed since he

spent a night or two in the drunk tank -- or in a holding cell. Surprisingly, the building doesn't hold too many bad memories -- the nights Billy spent here were devoid of the shadow of Neil Hargrove, which meant that they were blissfully silent and lovingly peaceful.

He bypasses the receptionist -- a pretty girl who he feels like he should remember from high school, but doesn't quite -- with a too-big grin, a wink, and a walk that says *'I know where I'm going.'* It works, and so Billy scans the room for a familiar wave of perfectly coiffed hair until he finds his target. *There* -- in the corner, working away on a stack of papers a mile high is Steve Harrington, officer and liar extraordinaire. He looks downright spiffy in his police uniform.

Billy plops himself down in the chair in front of Harrington's desk like he owns the space, legs spread and posture loose.

"Fancy seeing you here, Harrington. How's it hanging?" Billy asks, just as Steve notices him, absorbed in his work and likely not expecting visitors, especially Billy Hargrove. Billy awards Steve one of his winning smiles -- to which he gets a surprised look that turns rapidly into a glare.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to report a kidnapping, Officer."

Steve's eyes narrow. "What are you -- oh my god, keep your voice down."

Billy presses forward. "See, last night, I was forced inside an abandoned building by a group of kids -- teenagers, actually -- and someone else. Who was it -- oh, yeah! A member of law enforcement? That seems kinda fishy, doesn't it?"

Steve leans over his desk, as close as he's willing to get to Billy. "Will you *shut up*?"

"Only if you ask nicely," Billy grins, all teeth and charm.

Steve grimaces before he actually says '*please'*.

So, Billy drops his voice. He leans forward and rests his elbows on

Officer Harrington's desk. Getting all up close and personal until Steve leans back a little, creating a buffer of space between them. "I had a weird night. Didn't you, King Steve?"

"I had a normal night," Steve says. "I went grocery shopping and then went home. I made dinner and fell asleep around ten."

Billy picks up Steve's name plate and plays with it, tossing it between his hands.

"How'd you get that shiner? It looks pretty fresh." Billy asks, admiring the way his handiwork looks on Steve's face. Even better than than it did in high school, is the answer. Probably because they're more evenly matched, now. It feels more fair, is more satisfying to have gotten that hit in.

Steve bites down on his lip. Billy watches him, watches the way his jaw moves when his teeth strain down like he's trying to keep himself from saying something rude, or biting. Billy notices the way Steve's lip pales, then reddens at the pressure. "Why are you here, Hargrove?

"I'm here for answers. I wanna know what the fuck was up with last night. What, did you think I'd give up that easy?"

Steve probably did, given the annoyed look on his face. "If you don't have any official police business, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Yeah?" Billy says. "And what if I bypassed you entirely and just went straight to the chief? He and I go way back. We're practically pals."

Steve raises his eyebrows. Billy feels a little bit proud of himself, a little sneaky for the idea of looping someone else into this. Surely, that'll help his argument, his chances of Steve spilling some information in his direction.

And then Steve *smiles,* wide and brilliant, and Billy's pride goes straight out the window, replaced instantly with cold confusion. Steve *laughs* and it's like Billy just had a rug pulled out from underneath his feet. He doesn't *get it* -- but clearly Steve does.

Billy missed something along the way.

“Okay. Go ahead, go talk to the chief,” Steve says. “I’m sure he’d love to hear your crazy conspiracy theories. He *loves* hearing from Murray Bauman. Why don’t you tell him about how the Russians are working with aliens, now.”

Billy clenches his teeth and grimaces. “Yeah? Fine. You know what? I *will* go talk to the chief.” Billy leans back and lets his chair screech across the floor, as loud as he can make it. It’s unfortunate that no one turns to look at him -- but then again, in an open bullpen like this, they’re all probably used to raucous and rowdy people. Whatever. He doesn’t need anyone to notice him but Steve. Billy hadn’t exactly been planning on following up with that threat, on *actually* dragging Steve’s job into this -- but he *can*. And he will, if necessary. “I imagine he wouldn’t like the idea of his favorite officer breaking and entering with a bunch of teenagers. Looks kinda weird. You in an abandoned building with them, and all that.” It’s straight back to that night where Billy found Steve at the Byers and beat him out cold.

Thinking back to that night is still strange.

Steve isn’t fazed. “Okay, Billy. Go tell the chief.” Steve jerks his head back, non-verbally pointing at a door close by. It’s an office Billy’s been in quite a lot. “He’s right there.”

Billy lets his eyes focus on the door, trying to compose some sort of logical rant in his head. Sure, he’d been ready to sit down and talk to Steve, but he hadn’t exactly prepared himself to talk to Jim Hopper. Not that he’s not *going to* -- but he needs a game-plan, first. Even something vague.

But, before he can formulate anything other than something that sounds like crazy talk, the door to the station opens and Billy automatically turns to look at the source of the noise. He doesn’t expect to see anyone familiar, but his eyes fall on none other than that curly haired girl from last night. Shit, what did Steve call her? *Elle?* Billy’s face lights up. He doesn’t know why she’s here, but it’s *perfect*. A really great coincidence. “Her!” A plan starts to pull together in Billy’s head -- yeah, he can drag this kid into Hopper’s

office, tell him that he caught Harrington hanging out with Elle and her friends last night, and Harrington will agree to fess up before Billy can do more damage to his reputation. Or be any more of an embarrassment -- either way, Billy should be able to get something out of Steve.

“Yes, perfect. I can tell the chief she was there, *too*,” Billy says, mostly to himself, but also at Steve -- a warning about the imposing threat. If Steve wants to spill now, he could save himself a lot of trouble. But he doesn’t -- he just stays close-lipped and quiet.

Fine, then. Billy pushes himself up from the chair, heart pounding with enough excitement that it writes over the pain in his head.

But, before Billy can move, say, or *do* anything, Hopper is stepping out of his office. He takes a couple of strides into the bull pen, toward the rapidly approaching Elle and --

The chief smiles and wraps her in his arms.

What?

“Oh, yeah. That’s Hopper’s daughter, Jane.” Steve says. “She’s got him wrapped around her little finger.” Steve smiles like a cat that got the canary.

Billy stares, dumbfoundead, at the two of them hugging. He didn’t even know Hopper *had* a daughter. Billy could’ve sworn he didn’t. Billy lets himself slump back down in his chair, feeling a little defeated, a little overworn. But maybe that’s just fatigue and a head injury. Yeah, he can blame that.

“God dammit,” Billy says.

“So, did you have any other crazy shenanigans to report, Hargrove? Or are you going to stop taking up space at my desk?”

“I thought you said her name was *Elle*,” Billy says, after a beat.

“It’s Jane,” Steve says, all nonchalant, grabbing a pen and turning his attention back to his reports. Billy wants to punch him in his perfect, bruised face. “No one is going to believe you,” he says.

Billy clenches his teeth again, working his jaw until they grit together. Clicking. Grating. It doesn't help his headache at all.

"No one's going to believe a word you say, Billy. Just drop it. Leave it alone."

Billy bares his teeth. "Yeah? Would *you* drop it? Would *you* leave it alone?"

Steve is silent. He scratches away with his pen on carbon copy paper.

"I'll figure it out eventually," Billy warns him.

"There's nothing to figure out," Steve says with a sigh. Steve Harrington is perhaps the least convincing person Billy has ever met in his entire life, which is fine, because it's not like Billy is going to be dissuaded with some boring dismissal from a small town cop whose heyday was probably five years ago.

Billy catches Elle's eye -- *Jane's* -- as she follows the chief into his office, backpack slung over her shoulder carelessly. Billy snarls, annoyed and resolute and headachey. She smiles in a way that says '*no one will ever believe you*' and waves with a little sarcastic flourish of her fingers before ducking through Hopper's door. Steve laughs.

Billy wants to throw something. Instead, he slams Steve's name plate back down onto the desk and storms straight out of the station.

Notes for the Chapter:

> and this is the end of part 1. part 2, imminent. i'm super excited about writing this next part. did you know that this was going to be short, when i started writing it? whoops.
>
> sorry about the delay! leave a comment if you enjoyed it -- i'd be super grateful! <3

7. 2.1

Notes for the Chapter:

part two will be taking place from steve's perspective

The first time it happens, Steve writes it off.

The second time, he does too.

Three times is a pattern, though, and Steve is *not* that stupid (despite some of his senior grades stating otherwise), thank you.

“Oh, sorry,” Billy Hargrove says too cheerfully, after running into Steve’s cart with his own at the grocery store, cutting him off in the cereal aisle before Steve can make it to the registers. “I didn’t see you there.”

“Fat chance,” Steve mutters under his breath. Earlier this week he’d very nearly slammed into Billy on his morning jog, and had then almost run the man over with his car on Main by the butcher’s shop.

Steve hadn’t seen neither hide nor hair of Billy Hargrove for months after the man had meandered his way back into town, and now, suddenly, he’s everywhere? After their little run in at the lab? Yeah, that’s no coincidence.

Billy's stalking him: that much is for certain. And it's driving Steve *insane*.

Billy makes no motions to actually move his cart out of the way of Steve’s, blocking him off at the end of the aisle. Instead, he drapes himself over the front of his own cart like he's made of liquid and smiles.

“How’s it hanging, Harrington?”

“It’s fine,” Steve says. God, he’s had a long day. He just wants to buy his Honey Nut Cheerios and get the hell out of dodge.

“Great,” Billy says, his face wide and bright with that grin he likes to

use to disarm people, to woo lonely housewives. Steve's seen it a million times, both on Billy's face and on countless others. Sure, it might make Billy look like a sunkissed model, and it might make Steve's heart beat a little bit faster, but generally, Steve is immune to the allure of harmless flirting and peacocking by now. His first year of being a cop -- routine traffic stops *specifically* -- stomped that right out of him. "Aren't you going to ask me how my day is?" Billy asks with an exaggerated look that speaks of playful hurt. Like they're *friends*. Like there's no history between the two of them at all.

"I wasn't planning on it, no," Steve says, tired.

It's not that he hates Billy Hargrove. Steve's old enough now to know that they'd all been going through their own shit in high school. It doesn't make anything Billy did *excusable,* by any means -- but Steve gets it. He has an inkling, thanks to Max, what went on in the Hargrove household, and he has some sympathy for the guy. Steve just doesn't *like* him.

Billy is a reminder of a brutal year he would rather not remember much of, thanks.

"Your face is healing up pretty good," Billy tells him.

"Is it?"

Billy hums, loud and sarcastically contemplative. "It is. That's good -- I'd hate to be responsible for robbing the good citizens of Hawkins of their resident beauty queen."

Frustration and anger coil in Steve's gut, rapid onset. There's just something about Billy that brings out Steve's impulsive nature, his most base emotions. It's almost embarrassing, how easily Billy Hargrove gets to him.

It's like high school all over again.

"Are you done?" Steve asks. "Because I have more important things to be doing with my time than...whatever this is."

Billy just grins, not at all put off by Steve's tone, his dismissal.

Instead, he is still all charm, even with those matching, yellowing bruises on his face.

Billy makes them look good. Steve just looks a mess, he knows. Bruises and scrapes and none of Billy's rugged handsome charm. It's entirely unfair, really.

"Catch you around then, Harrington."

Steve kind of wants to punch him again. It had been so oddly satisfying, back in the lab.

--

"So, you're not worried about it?" Steve asks Hopper, after clicking the Chief's office door closed behind him. "The whole second gate thing? The tear?"

Steve flops down in the chair opposite Hop and tries to keep his anxiety at bay. It's been a long week.

"No," Hopper says, after taking a long and contemplative sip of his morning coffee. "I'm honesty more worried about why you let Billy Hargrove down there with you."

Steve groans. "How did you--?"

"El told me."

"Of course she did."

"You're an officer of the law, Harrington. You'd think something like that would help when deterring citizens from following you into restricted areas."

Hopper does not look very impressed. Steve isn't very impressed with himself, either, so that's at least par for the course. At least Hopper isn't *mad.* Steve doesn't know how to deal with the chief when he's angry, other than to just stay out of the way. A little disappointment is pretty par for the course.

"Shouldn't you be more concerned about there being another tear?"

Steve feels like that's more important than Billy. As frustrating as Billy is, he's not what Steve would consider a threat. Anymore, anyway.

“A demodog came out of it,” Steve says, like it's a winning argument.

“And El closed it in less than a minute. Look, kid, I called the Doc multiple times about this. We knew this scenario was going to happen at some point or another.”

Steve groans in frustration. “A *dog*, Hop. I hoped I'd never have to see one of those again.”

Honestly, Steve still has nightmares about the tunnels. And now they've just gotten more frequent since he’s been reminded of exactly what those things look like, all up close and personal.

“Steve,” Hopper starts -- and then he pauses, running a hand over his face. Collecting himself, his thoughts. “The Doc figured it only got bad enough to open another tear because that room’s been ignored for the last five years. You've been burning all the other problem areas before they have a chance to do anything. If it takes *five years* to open up another gate, then I think we’re doing pretty damn good.”

After that, Hopper smiles. “Besides, if the Government was concerned about it, they'd be mobilizing people back to the lab. And they're not. That's good enough for me.”

“I don't like it,” Steve says, even though Hop’s logic does make sense.

“Yeah, well, I'd prefer to live in a town that doesn't have this problem, but you don't get to be picky.”

Hopper drinks his coffee and levels Steve with a look Steve can only describe as fatherly honesty.

Steve knows he could leave Hawkins. He could choose to move to a different town, even a big city. He has the money, the means. He could go to college, like Nancy or Jonathan, and he could make a name for himself somewhere far away from the horror show that lurks in wait underneath Hawkins. He could remove himself from the constant nightmares.

But he can't do that. He doesn't *want* to do that. He has an obligation to this town, to the people in it. All of the people still tied up in this are his *family,* and that means the world to him. Steve would never leave them behind.

“I guess I'd rather deal with monsters than a crack problem, like they have down in Summerfield.”

At least keeping monsters at bay is less painful than watching his town suffer from something Steve can't do anything about. This way, he actually gets to do something. That was the whole reason he started to work for Hop in the first place.

Besides: for five whole years it hadn't really been a problem.

“Agreed,” Hopper says.

Steve steals a donut out of the box on Hopper’s desk.

Hopper clears his throat. “So, are we going to talk about why I keep seeing Hargrove inside my station, hovering around your desk? Or at you going to pretend I don't have eyes?”

“I told him to leave me alone,” Steve groans.

In the last week, he's seen way too much of Billy. Hargrove even brought him coffee yesterday from Edith's, Steve's favorite diner.

“Looks like he's not very good at following directions,” Hopper says.

“I told him nothing happened. He won't listen.”

Hopper drags a hand down his face. “He's not dumb, Harrington. You shouldn't have let him down there with you in the first place.”

“I know,” Steve hisses. “But it happened, so.”

“He's going to be like a dog with a bone about this,” Hopper warns. “El seems to think you should tell him the truth. Says he's trustworthy.”

Steve shakes his head. “Yeah, well. She's the only one. It's for his own

good, keeping him out of the loop. Besides, he's probably days away from high-tailing it out of Hawkins, anyway -- he always hated this town."

"You asked his sister about that?"

"No? Wait, do you think he's *actually* planning on sticking around?"

"I'm just saying, he could. Maybe you -- and the *party* -- should consider the possibility that Billy Hargrove's going to stick around."

"Hold on. Do you *want* me to tell him?"

"What I *want*," Hopper says with a long sigh, "is to not have to answer that in the first place. But I don't get that. Look, Harrington, I don't have an answer for you. The fewer people who know about this shit, the better -- but I also know Hargrove. And I don't think he's going to take kindly to being lied to."

"Maybe he'll leave," Steve says, hopeful. Like if he wishes hard enough, it'll be true.

Though, the thought of Billy leaving makes something strange twist in Steve's stomach. He doesn't want to look too closely on that, so he doesn't.

"Maybe," Hopper says, like he doesn't believe it one bit.

"I just think," Steve says, opting for a subject change, "that it's not good. I don't like it."

"Sure, it's not *good*, but I'm not worried about it. The Doc's not worried about it. The *government's* not worried about it."

Steve huffs, frustrated.

"Would it make you happier," Hopper says, "to go back every six months, instead of every year?"

Steve considers it. Eventually, he nods.

"Yeah," he says. It would definitely make him considerably happier.

Even as much as he hates going back to the lab, he's rather check it with his own eyes than cross his fingers and hope that it's not going to hell while he's not looking

“Alright,” Hopper says. “Then it's settled. Now, get out of my office. Merideth Oswald called about racoons in her attic again.”

“This feels like a punishment,” Steve says, though he knows old Mrs. Oswald will give him enough homemade oatmeal raisin cookies to count for both lunch *and* dinner. She’ll talk Steve's ear off for at least two hours, even though there are never any racoons -- she's just lonely.

It's not the worst assignment for a boring Wednesday, though, he thinks, heading toward the door.

He’s nearly out the door when Hop stops him.

“Oh, and Steve?” Hopper says.

“Yeah?”

“Tell Billy Hargrove to stop cluttering up my station. I don't want to see him in here again unless it's on actual business.”

“Sure thing.”

Hopper smiles, and that's a dangerous thing. “If he wants your company that badly, why don't you tell him to come to pizza night.”

Every friday, they all gather at the Byers’ for pizza. It's a warm, cozy, family affair. There's no way in hell Steve is ever inviting Billy Hargrove to *pizza night*.

“Funny, Hop,” Steve says. “Real funny. Just for that, I'm not bringing you back any cookies.”

“I'm on a diet, anyway,” Hopper says, and then takes a bite of a donut.

--

It's a few days before Steve sees Billy again.

Honestly, he had been kind of worried (only a little bit, though) that something had *happened* to the guy, given how often Steve had been seeing him out of the corner of his eye, in his shadow, just *everywhere*.

Or maybe, Steve thinks, as he catches Billy walking down Steve's street with his sunglasses on, all nonchalant, Billy's just gotten sneaker. Like he's trying to be inconspicuous. Maybe Steve has just gotten used to how over-the-top Billy had been; maybe Billy *has* been around and Steve just hasn't noticed him.

Steve thinks he prefers the annoyingly conspicuous Billy to the Billy who is good enough at following and stalking him that Steve's been entirely unaware of him at all.

Steve doesn't like the idea that he's maybe gotten complacent.

This life, the one brimming with monsters just under the surface of the earth, the dirt below his feet, isn't something to get lazy about. Steve can't afford to let his guard drop. Now now, not ever.

If Hopper and the Doc are right, *complacency* is the reason the second tear happened in the first place. It happened because they weren't thorough enough -- no, it happened because *Steve* wasn't thorough enough. Monsters had gotten back into Hawkins, and it had been Steve's job to do everything in his power to keep that from happening. And he failed.

And that's not okay.

Not even a little bit.

"What are you doing on my street?" Steve asks out the window of his jeep, rolling up slowly next to Billy.

He wonders if Billy is used to this, used to police cars always pulling up next to him to take him in. He's heard stories from Hopper about Billy being brought in from the side of the road way too many times to count. In high school, Billy Hargrove had been a nuisance and a public menace, even after he stopped fucking with Steve. Billy must

be used to it -- he's gotta be. Even if he hasn't been picked up by the police in years.

Steve stops the car at the curb. Billy stops and bends down to look at Steve through the window at him.

"Oh, is this *your* street?" Billy says. "I had no idea."

He grins again. His teeth are white and perfect.

"It is." Steve says.

They both know Billy knew that, but neither of them is going to mention it.

Billy leans on Steve's open window, smiling st Steve across the vacant passenger seat.

"Huh. I could've *sworn* you lived up on Holly Crescent."

"Five years ago, yeah," Steve says, through his teeth. "Time passes, things change."

Steve has gotten out of his parents house as fast as he could manage it.

"They sure do," Billy says.

He looks so sure of himself. Steve kind of hates it. He looks so much like the Billy Steve knew in high school, even though his hair is shorter and his eyes are older. There's a softness to him that wasn't there before, but frustratingly, it just adds to his image. Like Billy's even more confident now, more settled into his skin.

"So," Billy says with that same smile. "What can I do for you, officer?"

Steve feels strangely rattled. Not the same kind of rattled he feels before walking into the lab or into a violent encounter at his job -- but still, rattled.

"You can stay the hell off my street," Steve says. "And out of the

station, too. Chief's orders on that one."

Billy makes a big show of thinking about it, putting on a considering face. He swipes his tongue over his lips in concentration. Steve watches the slide of it, watches as Billy's lips glisten in the sunlight after he does it.

"I'll stay out of the station," Billy says. "But I can't make any promises about anything else. After all, this is a public road. What if I'm going, hm, how about... there?" Billy points at a house about three doors down from where they are, seemingly at random.

It's a small brick rambler with red shutters and a few broken shingles. Steve knows it well.

Steve sighs. "That's my house."

He gets the funny feeling Billy already knew that.

"Yeah? Well, what if I'm going there?"

"Trust me, that won't be a problem."

Billy just shrugs and smiles, like Steve's somehow *wrong* about that and Billy's just humoring him.

What a dick.

"Well, if there's nothing I can do for you, officer…" Billy says. "I do have to get to work. But if you need me for anything, I'd be more than happy to help out. I hear you need the occasional partner for some B&E's. Or some light kidnapping."

Then, Billy winks.

It's a particular kind of wink, too -- the kind that is prefaced with a lingering look at Steve's lips, a considering glance at what Steve's wearing, even though he's seated in the car. It's absolutely disingenuous, but goddamn does it seem real.

Steve feels his face heat, his gut flooding with annoyance at Billy's insistence and embarrassment from the stupid wink. Like Steve's a

sucker for the briefest hint of flirting or affection -- which he's *not*. It's just been a while since anyone gave him the kind of attention Billy Hargrove seems intent on giving him: full eye contact, beaming smiles, playful looks. The kind of attention that Steve used to get, back in the day. Steve's not used to it, and it makes him fluster, just a little bit.

But yeah, mostly it just makes him annoyed.

"Get out of my sight, Hargrove," Steve says, teeth clenched.

"Seeya around, pretty boy." Billy pats the side of the car and pulls back from Steve's window, unfolding himself too gracefully, too aware and in control of his own body.

Before Steve can drive off, Billy takes one last look at Steve's house, squints, and says: "And if you ever need someone to look at that roof of yours, lemme know. I've been told I'm pretty damn handy."

"*Goodbye,* Billy."

Notes for the Chapter:

> thanks for the patience: life got busy. as always, i'd be thrilled to pieces if you left a comment!

Author's Note:

> i always appreciate hearing what you think, so please leave a comment if you've got the time and/or the desire.
>
> you can find me on tumblr, if you are so inclined.